

Psalms 126-130 – John Karmelich

1. Welcome to the second of three lessons on a group of 15 psalms known as the "song of ascents". The title of every psalm in this group is that phrase. These psalms were sung, as religious Jews would travel a 3,000 feet journey up a mountain to Jerusalem to celebrate specific holidays.
 - a) The point for you and me is not about all this ancient history. It is about learning how to draw close to God as we gather together as a group of believers to worship Him.
 - b) This group of psalms is about proper perspective of our relationship with God. It is about our "mental" journey to seek God more than our physical journey. It was sung to remind the ancient Jews and us Christians to think about our relationship with Him.
2. Let me describe how these psalms get us to think about our relationship with God:
 - a) Psalm 126 is about being filled with joy after being "mentally" away from God for a while. Remember these psalms are about traveling as a group in order to seek Him as a group.
 - b) Psalm 127 is about what a waste of time life can be without Him guiding our lives.
 - c) Psalm 128 is about the blessing on our families for trusting Him. This journey to Jerusalem was not for us alone, but also for our families to seek Him as well.
 - d) Psalm 129 is about God helping us to deal with those who have hurt us in the past or those people or issues that distract us from focusing on Him.
 - e) Psalm 130 is about trusting that God has forgiven us of our sins.
 - f) Know that this group of psalms that started back in Psalm 120, form a pattern. One psalm leads well to the topic of the next one. The purpose of these psalms was not just to keep the Israelites busy as they traveled. They were designed to get their focus off of their problems and onto Him as they mentally prepared for these holidays.
3. OK how does all of this affect me? God does not want us to recite these psalms every time we go to church. The point is that when we as a group or a community make the effort to draw close to Him these psalms explain the process of just how we seek Him through our prayer life.
 - a) That leads to my lesson title: "How we draw close to God". This lesson is on how we should make an effort as a group to appreciate our relationship with Him.
 - i) Therefore, I do encourage you to read and study these psalms. Not to learn about ancient history, but to learn what God wants us to know and appreciate about our lives as we do make the effort to seek Him in our lives.
 - b) With that point made, I'm ready to take on the first psalm in this lesson, number 126.
4. Psalm 126 title: A song of ascents.
 - a) As I already explained, this is the title of all of the psalms in this group. Think of the word "ascents" as being short for "ascending up a mountain". The significance of "ascent" is that it describes what God wants us to focus on as we "ascend" to seek Him.
5. Verse 1: When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed.
 - a) In the last lesson, we had several "ascent" psalms written by King David. Most likely, this psalm was written many centuries later, when the Israelites came back from Babylonian captivity. The time gap between King David and that event was several hundred years. My point is these psalms were not organized as a group until long after they were written.
 - b) John, are you positive that is when this psalm was written? No, but that is the most likely time frame given the setting of this psalm. This opening verse is describing a time when the Israelites were ecstatic that they got to be back in Israel. Some quick history facts:
 - i) The Babylonians, who conquered Israel, later were conquered themselves by the Persians. (Think of the "Iranians conquering the Iraqi's" as a rough equivalent.) When this happened, the Persian king said in effect, "You Jews can go home". Out of a very large number of Jews who were relocated to the Babylonian Empire, only about 50,000 chose to make the first journey back to Israel. (See Ezra 1:3 and 2:64.)

- c) OK, it's time for my first "so what" lecture of the lesson. Whether or not this was the actual event that triggered this psalm, what does that have to do with us today?
 - i) The idea is about being excited about being in God's land. Remember that these psalms were used by traveling Jewish pilgrims to go to Jerusalem. Just as God wanted them to be ecstatic about traveling to Jerusalem to collectively seek Him, so God wants us to be excited about spending time as we draw close to Him.
 - ii) So does that mean I should be jumping up and down with joy every time I go to church? Well, that depends on your style of church service. ☺ What it does mean is that we should appreciate what a privilege it is to draw close to God and never lose sight of that privilege.
 - iii) Speaking of being happy as we are drawing close to God, let's look at Verse 2.
- 6. Verse 2: Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." ³ The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.
 - a) Let's start with the first sentence in Verse 2. It says in effect that when these Israelites got the opportunity to worship God, presumably for the first time in a long time, they were so ecstatic, they were filled with laughter and joy.
 - b) So, again, John, does this mean I should be ecstatic about going to church? Let me put it this way. There was a famous preacher in Los Angeles who used to say, "I see you out in the congregation get excited about the Lakers (that is our professional basketball team for my international readers), but I don't see the same sense of excitement about getting the opportunity to worship Jesus. How come you can be so excited watching a sporting event yet you show no excitement when you come to church?"
 - i) The point is not that we all have to join Pentecostal churches, but at the same time, there should be a sense of joy in our hearts about wanting to spend time with God.
 - ii) To put it another way, if we are saying to our family, "Come on everyone, grab your bibles, we must go to church now", we have the wrong attitude.
 - iii) God wants our time of worship to be a time of joy, not a time of duty. As I said in the last lesson, gathering with other believers is privilege.
 - iv) For some people that literally means jumping up and down with joy, and that is why we have Pentecostal churches. For others, hopefully the energy is focused through singing and thinking about God. It's not how we have joy that counts, it is that we care about God and therefore, we want to express that joy to Him.
 - c) OK, time for me to put my excitement aside ☺ and get back to Verses 2 and 3.
 - i) The last sentence of Verse 2 is then repeated in the first sentence of Verse 3.
 - ii) Sometimes in the bible, thoughts are repeated for emphasis. Remember that most people had to learn their bibles by listening and not actually reading bible scrolls.
 - iii) With that said, there is one simple difference between Verses 2 and 3. That is the words translated "them" and "us". In Verse 2, the point is the verse is saying that God has done great things for "them". In Verse 3, it says it is "for us".
 - iv) OK, who is the "them and us"? It simply means that future believers (i.e., us) are to realize that who ever this past generation was, we should remember God has done great things for them and He can and will do great things for us.
 - a) The point is knowing that God has rescued a large group of Israelites thousands of years ago is a lot more than learning history. It is about learning that He can and does do great things for our lives as well.
 - b) Therefore, as one journeys to Jerusalem (as the Israelites did on specific holidays) or as we journey to church, it is a good idea to remember that just as God has worked in their lives, so He can work in our lives to help us deal with whatever issues we are dealing with at any moment.

- d) Finally, these verses say, "filled with joy". For the sake of newcomers, let me explain the difference between "joy and happiness". One is happy based on one's circumstances. If one received a gift, it would make one happy for the moment. Joy is an internal feeling that is not based on circumstances. For example, knowing that one is saved should fill us with joy no matter what are our circumstances. Knowing that the results of our lives are God's problem and not ours is a reason to have joy in our lives. In summary, joy is about controlling one's attitude and happiness is based on circumstances.
- i) With that speech out of my system it's time for Verse 4.
7. Verse 4: Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.
- a) To appreciate this verse, one should spend some time in a desert location. In such areas, it rarely rains, but when it does, it usually pours down. The point is the ground can't absorb the rain when it falls that hard, and streams flow out of nowhere.
- i) Where I live in Southern California, this is part of our lives. We have flood control ditches that are empty most of the year. Yet, I've seen it rain really hard at times and those ditches fill up fast as the water has nowhere else to go. That in effect is what is being described in this verse: Water streams that were not there a moment ago. OK John, I get the picture. What does it have to do with this verse?
- ii) Now let's think back to the start of this psalm. The psalmist is describing a time when the Israelites first came back to their land. Most likely it refers to the time after the Babylonian Captivity. Here were many Israelites literally returning to their homeland. Now they are asking that they be blessed in their land again. It could be a pray for prosperity now that they are back in their homeland.
- b) John, you are giving us history from thousands of years ago, whatever the specifics. Tell me how this "traveling to Jerusalem" psalm about restoring one's fortune affects me?
- i) I am convinced that God's blessing for our lives and the worship of Him go hand in hand. Does this mean I will be rich if I spend a lot of time worshipping Him? That depends on what you mean by rich. There are multitudes of financially poor believers and many rich nonbelievers. As I like to say, if God made every believer financially rich, people would seek Him for the money and not out of a desire to draw close to Him.
- ii) OK, if that is true, what is the fortune's being restored here and how does that benefit my life? The way that I describe it is that the benefit of trusting in God means that my life is now His problem. I trust in God to lead my life and He does. That still means I have to do the "footwork" which simply means going through life and make the best decisions possible. At the same time, I am trusting that He is guiding my life for His glory and He will provide for my needs.
- iii) This leads me back to "restoring our fortunes". The Israelites were kicked out of the land of Israel essentially for collectively ignoring Him. This psalm is about singing praise to God as one is seeking Him. The idea for us is if we as a group collectively seek Him, I do believe He "restores the fortunes of that group" in the sense that if we trust God for our prosperity, "He won't let us down".
- a) To put it another way, "Our lives are now His problem". If it is His desire for us to live another day, it is His business, not ours. Since He is in charge of our live, He gets to decide when it is over. Further, if it is His desire that we financially prosper, it is His business.
- b) This leads me back to "restoring our fortune" like rivers in a dry desert. God desires to bless us far more than we can imagine just like rivers "flowing out of nowhere" in a desert. How God restores our fortunes is His business, but we still have to make the effort. Since we belong to Him, our job is to follow, by making the best decisions possible given our circumstances and trust that He is guiding us.

8. Verse 5: Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. ⁶ He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.
- a) The last two verses of this psalm continue the same theme of "things may be bad now, but God never lets down those who trust in Him." Therefore, the idea is to collectively seek Him so that He can collectively bless our lives.
 - b) Let me explain this idea another way: Think of going through a horrible situation. How does one ask God to bless our lives in the middle of a tragedy? Suppose we lose someone we love. How do we approach God with joy during such difficult times of our lives?
 - i) As I like to remind myself, if this life is all that there is, it is not fair. However, if there is a next life, that is the only way one can deal with such tragedies.
 - ii) The point is God can give us a sense of peace during the worst of times.
 - c) But John, verse six is describing being sad while carrying a bag of seed to sow, and then carrying sheaves, which is a picture of collecting crops when harvested. Are you saying that if we seek God we will collect whatever we plant?
 - i) Remember that this is not about financial blessing, but spiritual blessing. I've yet to see someone be a witness for God, where it was a waste of time.
 - ii) There is a quote from Isaiah that works well here: "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:11, NIV)
 - a) My translation: "Making a difference for God is never a waste of time." In some way, teaching God's word always produces dividends for that action.
 - iii) This leads me back to the reference to carrying a bag of seed and coming back with crops in one's hand. No it does not mean we all have to be farmers. It just means it is never a waste of our time to seek God collectively or to do things that make a difference for Him. God will somehow always benefit from our efforts.
 - iv) If we are willing to take the time to at the least collectively worship God, or make the effort to make a difference for Him, that effort will never come back empty.
9. Psalm 127, title: A song of ascents. Of Solomon.
- a) The title of this psalm, mentions the fact that King Solomon (the son of David) wrote it. So why mention the author over and above the usual "ascent" reference? I suspect it was because under Solomon, the first "permanent" Jewish temple structure was built.
 - i) In this psalm, it discusses building a house and the fact that it is a waste of effort to build something unless God is in the project.
 - ii) This psalm is describing building a physical house as well as building a family. Just as "home" in English can be describing a physical structure as well as people living in home, so that concept works in the original Hebrew language as well.
 - b) With that said, let us read this four line psalm and learn how not to waste our time.
10. Verse 1: Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.
- a) My loose translation of this verse: "Unless God is part of whatever we are doing at the moment, whatever we are doing is ultimately a waste of time."
 - i) If you talk to an atheist, ask them if they believe that the world as we know it, will one day no longer exist. If they believe that is true, anything we do in this world ultimately has no purpose.
 - a) They may argue that good things do occur that benefit our lives in the "mean time". But my point is if there is no God, anything we do in this life ultimately has no meaning.
 - ii) This leads me back to this verse. If we do believe in an eternal life, then logically, we would want to do things that would benefit us eternally. If we are going to be with God forever, then we want to start pleasing Him now. In effect, learning to live for God is life's purpose.

- b) All of that leads us to Verse 1. The illustrations used in this verse in effect make the point that unless God is involved, any project in our life is ultimately a waste of time.
 - i) This leads to the second verse illustration about a night watchman for a city. The point is unless that city trusts in God "collectively" (that is, people living by the principals taught in the bible about not stealing, murdering and even caring for one another) then having a watchmen watch for outside threats is a waste of time.
 - c) So besides the fact that ultimately life is a waste of time if there is no God, our problems in life generally come down to the fact that since we sin, things go wrong. OK, John, this is not news. ☺ What then is the point? This leads back to the other aspect of the psalm title, "A song of ascents". Remember all of these psalms in this group are about the benefit of seeking God collectively. Our ability to avoid sin does not come from trying harder, but by God working through our lives to make us better people.
 - i) Therefore, we collectively seek God in order to ask Him to guide us to be the type of person He wants us to be. When we go back to our lives, we ask God to guide us to do His will. That is how we "build and guard" our houses. Not just by saying, "Dear God, bless this project", but by trusting in the fact that He is guiding our lives and we agree to live by the principals taught in the bible. If we are willing to make the effort to be lead by God, the point is He will lead us.
 - ii) Believe or it not, this leads me perfectly to Verse 2.
11. Verse 2: In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat-- for he grants sleep to those he loves.
- a) For those of you who have been reading my lessons for a long time, I comment every now and then about a lack of sleep. I battle sleeplessness (like I am at this moment) and I end up writing and editing these studies in the middle of the night.
 - b) OK John, and what does that have to do with this verse? This verse says that, "God grants sleep to those he loves". As one who struggles with sleeplessness, I need to understand how the bible says God "grants us sleep" when for many years I struggle with good sleep.
 - i) First of all, the point of this whole verse is in effect that it is a waste of time to work early or work late if God is not part of that project. It is a waste of time to lose sleep working long hours if He is not part of that project. This comes back to my "life is ultimately a waste of time" comment if there is no next life.
 - ii) This verse is not condemning hard work or long hours if it is God's will. For my own life, I've had to accept the idea that God sometimes wants me up late at night or early in the morning, in effect because He has something He wants to say to me through this ministry. The point here is not that we won't have sleepless nights. The point is it is vain to work extra hard if God is not in that project.
 - c) Now comes the extra hard question: How do we know if our project of the moment is "God's will?" The best answer is that "time will tell". Sometimes the answer comes from just asking Him. Sometimes the answer comes by comparing our project to God's word. Sometimes we just have to wait and see the results of our project and then think, "OK, that project was or was not a benefit to my life." Never underestimate the things we can learn in life by God showing us in effect, "That was not my will for you at this time."
 - i) In summary, this verse is not about avoiding hard work, long hours or even sleeplessness at times. It is about doing "God's will" for our lives.
 - ii) Think about Paul's travel as a missionary. I believe Paul just traveled along the Roman roads and preached wherever the next town was. Yes God did lead him to certain places just as God leads us to certain places. Other times we just "go".
 - d) Let me wrap this up by discussing this verse in context of the "ascents". This psalm was designed to be sung as one travels to spend time with God. My point is as one is traveling to seek God, remember what a waste of time life ultimately is, without God in the picture. That waste of time includes a waste of long working hours and a lack of sleep.

12. Verse 3: Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him.
- a) This seems like a strange transition. From discussing the fact that it is a waste of time to build things without God, to discussing having children being a blessing. The connecting thought is about building a "home", refers to both a building as well as a family.
 - b) Let's start with the obvious: One point of this verse is that we can be busy working so hard, we don't appreciate having time with one's family.
 - i) Next, let's discuss the difficulty of raising children. All parents know how difficult it is to raise children, so how is it that God considers this a blessing? The idea is that it is His will for us to raise "Godly children" despite that difficulty.
 - ii) The results of seeing one's children learn to trust God with their lives is the long-term blessing. For that, it is worth all of the struggles of raising them. Does that mean if we make the effort to raise our children right, they will definitely be saved? Of course not, but the odds are much better of seeing our children "walk with God" if we make that effort to raise them right in the first place.
 - c) Now think of this verse in context of collectively seeking God. The point is as one travels to seek Him, we should take our children with us so they too can have that opportunity.
 - i) Let me address those who have lost children. How can the psalm say we are blessed by having children if they die young? I answer that with this question: "Is it better to never have known that child in the first place or is it better to have spent time with them before they died?" Obviously it is better to say that we got to spend that time with that child, despite the loss. That time spent is the blessing.
 - d) It is interesting, to consider God's timing as I wrote that last paragraph. Last night I was recalling how my wife and I struggled to have children and eventually we had two girls. I admit I always wanted a son, but it wasn't meant to be. We considered adopting, but that also wasn't meant to be and I had to let go of that desire of wanting a son.
 - i) Now here is this verse saying, "Sons are a heritage from God". This verse is not saying one is guaranteed a son if one tries. It just says that sons are a heritage.
 - ii) At this point I am reminded of the expression, "Every Paul needs a Timothy and every Timothy needs a Paul." When we read of Paul's travels, he was single and he never had any sons. Yet Paul took on a young man named Timothy to help raise him to be a godly man. My point is God desires that we older men also help to raise the next generation of male leaders and look for younger men we can help.
 - iii) Yes there is a younger man at my church I am helping and that is how God can give me the "son" I never had. The point is sons can be a blessing from God if we are willing to make the effort to find our "Timothy" to raise to trust in Him.
13. Verse 4: Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. ⁵ Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.
- a) I have to admit, I struggle with Verse 4, as I never had a son, nor do I easily relate to the illustration of a warrior having arrows. With that said, here is my best shot at explaining these verses: A warrior needs weapons in order to be a warrior in the first place. Raising sons when one is young is a way to channel our energy in a way that pleases God.
 - i) I heard it explained this way: A God-fearing young man spending time with his son(s) to teach them the right things to do in life. Just like a warrior knows how to use arrows, so a man that fears God teaches his boys how to trust Him as well and how to use the parent's energy in a way God desired it to be used.
 - b) One thing that really bothers me is when I see a divorced father not spending time with his children. Statistically, young men who don't have good fathers involved in their lives commit most crimes. Most of the crime problems we wrongly associate with race are actually due to a lack of good father figures. Boys go down the wrong path in life often because they don't have good fathers to teach them right from wrong.

- c) All of this lecturing about raising boys right leads me back to these verses. These verses are saying in effect, "Blessed are the young man who takes the time to spend time with his children. That effort will eventually produce good adults."
 - d) This leads to the last part of Verse 6 that says, "They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate." OK, what does that have to do with raising good children especially boys? Glad you asked. ☺
 - i) First, understand that for most of recorded history, people lived inside walled cities for protection. Enemies were sometimes at the gate. In order to defeat those enemies, one needs "numbers" to fight them. The point is if we raise our children well, they will eventually follow in our footsteps of doing the right thing.
 - ii) Now think of the enemy in terms of our desire to sin. The point is if we teach our children to do what is right and teach them about depending upon God in order to do the right thing in the first place.
 - iii) The point is using our energy to raise our children right is never a waste of time.
 - e) Now let me put all of these psalm verses together to make another point: Yes, we should live our lives to make a difference for God. Next we remember that unless we are doing things in order to make that difference, life is a waste of time. Next we should pass on our good traits about seeking God to the next generation. That is why we are blessed to have children so we can enjoy the blessing of seeing the next generation seek God as well.
 - f) This concept of "being blessed by God" does continue to Psalm 128, so let's keep moving.
14. Psalm 128, Verse 1: Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways.
- a) I skipped the title, because it is the usual "song of ascents" reference. The point of the title as it relates to Verse 1 is that as one is walking towards worshipping God, one must remember that we are blessed if we fear Him and do what He asks of us. Let me explain:
 - i) Fear of God is not fearing that He will "zap us dead" any second. Fearing God is that knowing when we sin, we must deal with the consequences of that sin.
 - ii) The idea is we know we are eternally saved and therefore eternally forgiven of all our sins. Still, in this lifetime, it should be our desire to please God by living, as He desires. We fear not being pleasing to Him, so therefore we live as He desires.
 - iii) Again, it is not by "effort", but by the fact we are trusting in God to work through our lives in order to make that difference for Him. If we find ourselves doing the right thing without "even trying", then we are doing His will and we are fearing God whether we make that statement or not.
 - iv) Remember that pleasing God is not by "trying harder", but by asking Him and trusting Him to change us to be the type of person He wants us to be. By having God change us, He gets the credit for the changes in our life to His desire for us.
15. Verse 2: You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours.
- a) This verse effectively says that we will prosper in life if we fear God. OK, John, explain to me how that works? Most of us know of God-fearing people who suffered tragic deaths.
 - i) This is a general principal and not an "it will happen every time" rule.
 - ii) The point is if we are willing to live a God fearing life, usually the results is we will get to see the benefit of living life that way. To put it simply, if we are honest and don't steal and work hard, we will see the benefits of that life in the long run.
 - iii) To say it another way, "Hard work pays off". Success in life means we usually have to start somewhere and usually it means starting at the bottom. If we are willing to work hard and trust in God, eventually that does pay off.
 - b) What about your example of those who suffer tragedy? Sometimes we just have to trust that God has some plan to teach them or others around them through that tragedy. For example, I know of people who became doctors because of terrible pain they experienced in their own lives. They want to help others not deal with the same sort of pain. My point is simply that God often allows tragedies as part of a greater purpose.

16. Verse 3: Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table.
- a) To understand this verse, remember that the bible often speaks in general principals, and not in terms of what will happen to everybody. That general principal here is that if a man is willing to commit his life to God at a reasonably young age (old enough to still have a family), God will bless that man with a wife that produces children for that man.
 - b) One has to remember that God designed marriage with the purpose of creating children in order to have good families. What this verse is saying is that trust in God and having a "healthy" family go hand in hand. If we are willing to take the time to regularly worship God and trust in Him, we will benefit with families that honor Him as well. Again, this is a general rule and obviously, it does not apply to everyone.
 - c) Let me comment briefly on the phrase "around the table". Many families get so busy with their individual lives that they rarely take the time to sit and eat together. I remember how my father loved to have the whole family gather around the table for dinner. As we got older, "Sunday dinner" was a still a requirement to return home. The point is if one has a family, take the time to spend time together as a family and God will bless that time.
17. Verse 4: Thus is the man blessed who fears the LORD.
- a) If one can't tell by now, this psalm focuses on blessing on the home life for trusting in God. But isn't this psalm about traveling to Jerusalem to seek God collectively? Why speak of the benefits of a healthy family if one is traveling, say with a big group of people? I believe the reason is for us to appreciate the joys in life He gives us, and one of those pleasures is having a healthy interaction with our own families.
 - b) Let me address those who don't have a healthy family situation. First of all, it is never too late in life to create one. Even if one is too old to have children, one can choose to hang around people and form a family bond with others. Just as God never intended us to worship Him alone, so He never intended us to be isolated and ignore other believers around us. My point is simply if one doesn't have a healthy family one can turn to for support, one can create one's one family through friends around them.
 - i) So if we do have an unhealthy family, how do we deal with them and still trust in God? The short answer is the best we can. Like every other aspect of our lives, we trust in God to guide us and help us through such situations.
 - c) The point of this verse here is simply that if we do trust in God, "odds are good" that we will have a healthy family. It doesn't mean we won't have problems at home. It just means if we are willing to do what is right, God will bless us with wonderful families.
18. Verse 5: May the LORD bless you from Zion all the days of your life; may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem, ⁶ and may you live to see your children's children.
- a) If God is going to bless us from "Zion", let me explain what that means. Essentially it is a word to describe Israel in the religious sense. The idea is that the "God of Israel" is also the God of the whole world. One way He blesses us is with a healthy family situation.
 - b) This verse is not a guarantee that one will live long enough to see one's grandchildren. If we have children at a young age, and raise them to have God fearing children, "odds are good" we will live to see one's grandchildren. Again, this is a general rule.
 - c) Being a grandparent is usually a wonderful experience because most of the time you don't have the responsibility of raising them. To repeat an old cliché, "If I knew how much fun it was to be a grandparent, I would have had my grandchildren first and skipped being a parent." I also like the joke, "Do you know why grandparents and grandchildren get along so well? Because they are united against the common enemy." ☺
 - d) This verse also mentions the "prosperity of Jerusalem", which was the theme of the last lesson. It should be the desire of Christians to see the worship of the true God "flourish". Therefore, we should be "Pro-Israel", not due to their politics, but due to the fact that God choose this particular piece of real estate to be His worship center for the world.

19. Verse 6 (cont.): Peace be upon Israel.
- a) Speaking of Israel, this psalm ends with a blessing on that nation. Again, the point is that we as Christians trust in a God of the Jewish people as also the God of the whole world. The peace of that country should be a prayer of ours so that worship of God will prosper.
 - b) There is an expression I've always liked on this topic: "The mistake many Jews make is they fail to see that their God is also the one who died for their sins. The mistake many Christians make is they fail to see the God of the world as also being the God of the Jews".
 - i) The point of that expression is that Christians need to recognize that we worship "A Jewish God". Therefore, we as Christians should pray for the peace of Israel.
20. Psalm 129: They have greatly oppressed me from my youth-- let Israel say-- ² they have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained the victory over me.
- a) OK, moving from a psalm that focuses on home blessings, we now move on to the next "traveling" psalm that focuses on one's enemies. It is as if the psalmist is saying, "Yes, I know God has blessed me in many ways for trusting in Him, but I still have these problems all around me. What do I do about them?"
 - b) Notice these two verses say in effect, "I've had to deal with bad people and problems since I was young. Yet despite that, I can still take the time to worship God and thank Him at the least for keeping me alive to this moment in time.
 - c) Notice Verse 2 says that one's enemies have not gained victory over the believer.
 - i) This "victory" here is about perspective. We may have lost loved ones, we may have lost financial wealth or may have lost our health, but if we are still breathing, we can and should take the time to worship Him. The victory is our continuous relationship with Him despite whatever is happening in our life.
 - ii) Remember that to be defeated is about failing to trust in God's ability to guide our lives. I am convinced the opposite of faith is fear. Whatever we fear at any given moment in time is in effect about not trusting in God to guide us. The psalmist has had victories over whatever he was facing because He still trusts in God to guide his life despite the mistakes he and us make through our lives.
 - d) All of this leads back to the concept of traveling to worship God. If we still trust in God despite all we have been through in life, we should regularly take the time to express our gratitude to Him for guiding us. One part of our prayer life should be "thanksgiving". We should be grateful for how God has guided our lives to date and trust that if we believe He has gotten us "this far", He will guide us through the rest of our lives.
21. Verse 3: Plowmen have plowed my back and made their furrows long.
- a) Meanwhile, besides all of this "God still is guiding us" positive talk, the psalmist is still giving us details of how he was hurt by others.
 - b) For us non-farmers, let me explain what is a "furrow". That is a long row one cuts in the soil to plant seed. The illustration here is just as a farmer prepares the soil to plant crops, so other "bad people" have cut into the psalmist back.
 - i) Did that mean he was literally whipped by nonbelievers? I don't know.
 - ii) What I suspect it means for us is that we have been hurt by what others have said or done to us in our lives. The point here is not the specifics, but to remember that we can take the pain caused to us in life and give that pain to God.
 - iii) Let me explain a little more: If we as Christians truly believe our problems are now God's problems, it is a matter of turning that pain over to Him and say in effect, "I can't deal with this. This pain is now your issue."
 - c) The reason this psalm is here after a wonderful psalm about praise for one's family is about the reminder that we can and should turn our issues over to Him.
 - i) If we are going to praise God for the great blessings of our lives, then in effect at the same time, we also have to give to Him all the pains we are dealing with so we can, at least for a time, let it go and praise Him for the good things we have in life.

22. Verse 4: But the LORD is righteous; he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked.
- a) My loose translation: God always does the right thing, and because I give to Him all the results from the situation I am dealing with. Therefore, I don't have to worry about what others have and continue to do to me."
 - b) OK John, what if the cause of that pain is still out there? First, welcome to the club. The idea of taking the time to seek God is not only about being grateful for the good He has done for us, but about giving Him our problems we are currently dealing with.
 - c) To put it another way, if this issue was no longer an issue for the psalmist, I doubt he would have brought it up in the first place. This verse is not saying our problems will magically go away if we trust in God. This verse is saying He can and does separate us from the results caused from our problems. Yes I still have to deal with my problems, but the results of those issues are God's problem and not mine. Therefore, I can have peace despite whatever it is I have to deal with in my life.
23. Verse 5: May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame.
- a) If we believe God is going to win anyway, why pray that our enemies turn back in shame? Don't we trust in God to lead us to victory? (By the way, the phrase "Those who hate Zion" is simply a colorful way of saying may those who hate the God we serve.)
 - i) This verse is in effect a prayer that God's timing be "now". One can and should always pray for God to act now. We just have to accept the idea that sometimes He can say no or in effect "wait till later" for our prayer request.
 - ii) Think about this request in terms of traveling to seek God as a group. There may be people around us who want to put us down for wanting to seek Him. The request is that the effort to prevent us from seeking Him, be put down to nothing.
 - b) Notice this request is not for the death of non-believers, but just that they be ashamed of their actions. Yes there are other psalm references where David wanted really bad things and death for those who opposed the will of God. Remember that this series of psalms is about the desire as a community to draw close to God. The prayer in effect is that those who want to oppose those of us drawing close to Him be ashamed of how they are acting.
 - c) If we are going to give our problems to God, then we have to "just that". We still have to do the footwork to deal with our problems, but whatever is the results of that situation in effect His problem and not ours because we "belong to Him".
24. Verse 6: May they be like grass on the roof, which withers before it can grow; ⁷ with it the reaper cannot fill his hands, nor the one who gathers fill his arms.
- a) Speaking of wishing "even worse things" on nonbelievers, I present Verses 6 and 7.
 - b) Let me explain the literal reference of this verse, and then I'll explain how it applies to us.
 - i) Roofs of houses in biblical times were often made of dirt. Sometimes grass can blow in the area and a little bit of grass or maybe a weed starts to grow on that dirt based roof. However, that amount of grass is so small and the layer of dirt is so thin, it cannot survive for very long.
 - ii) With that reference to "minimal" growth in mind, (remember this is poetry), the idea is that those who oppose us seeking God, "come to nothing".
 - c) Let me explain this one more way: No matter how hard we try in life, there are always going to be people who oppose God's will. There are always going to be doubters and those who say to us (or think to us) "You people are wasting your time praying to God".
 - i) If such people are always going to be around anyway, why pray for their shame?
 - a) The answer is two fold: The first is we should pray that their actions do not deter from seeking God as He desires us to do.
 - b) The second point is that God desires all people to seek Him. By asking that those who don't want to seek God "come to shame" as in effect Verse 5 says, then we are praying they see the results of turning from Him.

25. Verse 8: May those who pass by not say, "The blessing of the LORD be upon you; we bless you in the name of the LORD."
- a) This verse says in effect, "Don't accept the blessing of non-God fearing people as their blessing is not God-ordained."
 - b) I am reminded in the New Testament when Paul wanted a girl to "shut up" who was following him around. This girl was stating out loud Paul was a man of God. (Acts 16:17-18). God does not accept the testimony of nonbelievers. That is why Paul put down the words of that girl who was praising him at that moment.
 - i) OK, why is that? If a nonbeliever is saying something nice about us believing in God or say, going to church, why should we ignore that comment? The answer again is that God does not accept the testimony of nonbelievers. I suspect the speaker in Verse 8 is not sincere in that statement. That is another reason why we shouldn't accept such compliments.
 - ii) The point is not about being mean to nonbelievers. The point is about not taking to heart the testimony of those who don't trust in God in the first place.
 - iii) We can and should say thank you to others for sincere compliments. The point is we shouldn't let such compliments affect our ego, as they are not "God based".
 - c) Let me put this whole psalm in perspective. This whole psalm is about dealing with those who don't trust in God. The verses range from "harsh actions against believers" in the early verses to the desire of such enemies to put us to shame in Verses 6-7 and here in Verse 8, the desire of our enemies not to give us false compliments. What gives?
 - i) The key point is about as we seek God, not to focus on how others desire to harm us. The type of "harm" can range from physical attacks to insincere compliments. The point is in order to seek God, we have to let go not only of the pain of how others have hurt us, but also let go of their efforts to oppose us seeking Him.
 - ii) The point is if we are going to be with other believers in order to praise God, we must let go of any and all efforts that distract us from focusing on Him.
 - d) OK, let's do one more short psalm and I'll call it a lesson. ☺
26. Psalm 130, Verse 1: Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD; ² O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.
- a) The focus of this psalm is on our own sins. The pattern here is now that we have let go of how others have and could have hurt us, we can now focus on our issues.
 - i) Let me put this another way: Once we have given to God the pain of how others have hurt us or are trying to hurt us, we can now focus on what God wants us to focus on, which is our own relationship with Him.
 - b) Remember that this whole series of psalms is about the desire to draw close to Him. In order to have that close relationship, it requires the confession of our own sins, and that is the purpose of Psalm 130. It is a petition for mercy for the punishment we deserve.
 - c) Let me move on to the next verse and this will be more obvious.
27. Verse 3: If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?
- a) Suppose God kept a record of everything we have ever done wrong in life. Who can still stand before a perfect God, if He kept such a record? As I say every now and then, most people believe that God judges us and hope our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds. They falsely think that God judges us on some sort of curve. The reality is God is perfect and there is no "curve" for judgment. That doesn't mean He expects us to be perfect, just perfectly forgiven. This leads us back to Verse 3. The point here is that no person could stand before God and be judged if He did keep a record of all the sins of believers.
 - b) To sum up this verse, the point is simply that we are grateful God forgives our sins.
 - c) But John, what about babies who die? How does God judge them? I believe a perfect God judges all people fairly and in effect, "That is His problem, not mine." I believe in a perfect God and a perfect God will also give perfect judgment on all people.

28. Verse 4: But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.
- a) My question about this verse is, "If we believe God forgives all of our sins, why should we fear His judgment as this verse implies?" The idea is not to think, "It is ok, to sin because I know God will forgive me." The idea is to think, "It is my desire to please Him, and therefore I want to avoid sin in the first place. Yes God will forgive our sins if we turn from them, but at the same time we should fear the consequences in this lifetime, as we still must suffer the consequences of our sins.
 - b) Let me put it this way: Suppose we stole something. Yes we can ask forgiveness and God will forgive us. Still, there is a price to be paid for that action and we have to suffer the consequences of that sin. That is why God is to be feared, because He watches our actions and in effect, "He loves us too much to let us get away with any sin in our life."
29. Verse 5: I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. ⁶ My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.
- a) These two verses say in effect, "I am waiting on God's timing. I am waiting more than those who night watchmen wait for the morning light, which means their shift is done".
 - i) Let me explain night watchmen a little more. Cities back then had walls around them. A big danger was enemies attacking at night. In the morning, the danger of attack decreases and therefore, the job of the night watchman is now over.
 - b) So the psalmist is waiting on God more than the night watchman is waiting for the end of his "work night". What is the point? Remember the issue of the moment is forgiveness of sins. We have ended our worry about our enemies in the previous psalm and in this psalm we are now focusing on our own shortcomings before God.
 - i) Bottom line is we are waiting on God's timing for our lives. Let me explain:
 - a) We don't know when our life will end. Therefore as long as we live, we depend upon Him and His word to guide us. We accept the idea that He has forgiven our sins, and now we depend upon Him to guide our lives.
 - ii) The "waiting" is not about waiting for God to forgive our sins. The waiting is about us waiting for God to guide our lives the way He wants to on His timing.

30. Verse 7: O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. ⁸ He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

 - a) Remember that this psalm was used in traveling to seek God. Here in this verse and this psalm, we let go of ways we have offended God so we can focus on His love. The point is we put our hope in Him. However, we can't just blindly come to God and assume all of our sins are "just" forgiven. Yes God loves us unconditionally, but we still must confess our sins as we become aware of them so we know how we have offended Him.
 - b) That little speech leads me to this verse. It is a "benediction" that we learn to trust in God's love and redemption not only by believing in His existence, but by trusting Him daily with our lives.

31. Let me end this lesson by reminding all of us of "where we are" in these psalms. I stated in the introduction that the purpose of these psalms is in effect about learning how to draw close to God. These "ascend" psalms form of pattern of how to draw close to God. That is why I gave an emphasis on how each psalm logically leads into the next one. This continuation of drawing close to Him will continue in the next lesson, in the last four psalms of this series.

32. Let me use my closing prayer to talk a little more about how wants to bless our lives as believers as we draw close to Him: Heavenly Father, it is Your desire that we seek You as individuals and as groups or to put it another way, to seek You as a family of believers. Help us to realize that Your plan for our lives is not only different from the plan of other believers, but is also the best thing one can do for our lives. Help us to let go of the pain others have caused us so we can focus on You. Finally, help us to let go of ways we have hurt You through sin, so we can have a loving relationship without that sin being "in the way". We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.