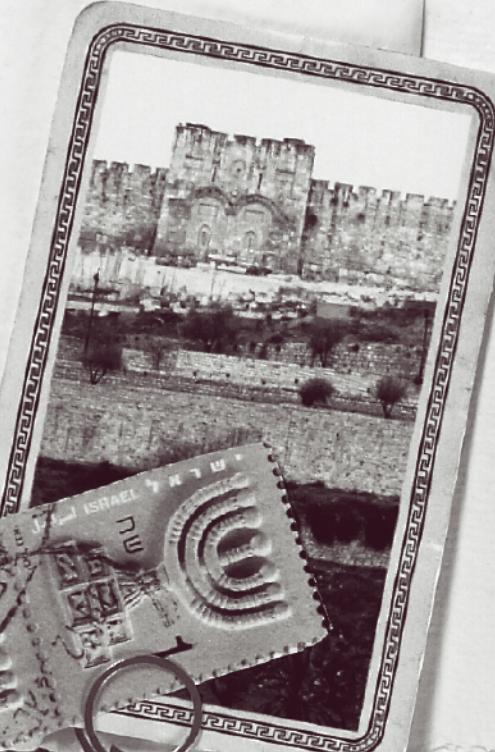


Week Two
Our Eyes Look to the Lord

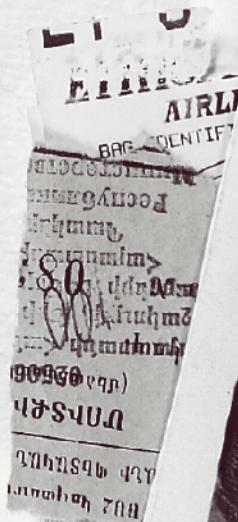
Day One: Our Own House,
Our Own City
Day Two: The One Enthroned
Day Three: Much Contempt
Day Four: If The Lord
Had Not
Day Five: Praise the Lord



Principal Questions

1. What were Paul's feelings toward the believers in Philippi (Phil. 1:3-8)?
2. What do you consider to be the theme of Psalm 123?
3. How would you define *disrespect*?
4. With what metaphors does Psalm 124 describe the peril that surrounds God's people?

5. With what three historical situations were the Psalms of Ascent associated?





Day One

Our Own House, Our Own City

As we begin our second week, we place both feet on the third step of our ascent. Please read either of the translations of Psalm 122 in the previous lesson to refresh your memory. When you've read it, check here: _____

On week 1, day 5 we viewed Psalm 122 in a more literal context. Today we are going to draw parallels between the rich lines of the song and our own lives. Each of us has a different heritage God uses to fashion us into the servants He wants us to be. My friend, Jolinda, pours out her life for those who are HIV positive in South Africa. An avowed atheist until five years ago, she met God and instantly enrolled in seminary. As I watched her minister in her unique environment, I marveled over God's brilliance to choose not only Jolinda's exact personality but also her exact past. The fact that she was not raised in a highly religious culture, I believe, works in significant ways in her favor. She doesn't speak Christian-ese so fluently that individuals she works with can't understand her explanations.

On the other hand, you may be like me. I was on the cradle roll at church and learned to toddle on heel-marked linoleum strewn with brightly colored blocks and oversized puzzle pieces. By the time I could sit in a miniature chair and hear a child-size Bible story, I already bore the signs of sexual abuse. How I still believed in the goodness of the God my Sunday School teachers taught about remains a mystery to me. I am so grateful to God for the grace to believe amid the madness.

Our teachers encouraged us to learn short Bible verses long before we could read. *Today's Treasure* is dear to me because it is one of the first verses I ever memorized. Glance at it again. The corresponding picture my teachers displayed with the verse had a young mom and dad and several children walking together on the sidewalk toward their church, each smiling ear to ear. (Perhaps that was the one lone Sunday they didn't have a fight in the car on the way.) A more literal visual for the psalm would have been a picture of Jews climbing the steps to the temple in ancient Jerusalem, but four-year-olds would have had difficulty relating.

While the trek to our churches bears few true parallels to the pilgrimage to Israel's central location for worship, let's not be so academic that we miss the sentiment. Consider an explanation from *Word Biblical Commentary*. It tells us Psalm 122 "like Psalm 84, regards Jerusalem with a pilgrim's warmth of religious emotion rather than with depth of theological learning."¹ Today I wonder if you'd be sappy enough to enter into "a pilgrim's warmth of spiritual emotion" with me. The apostle Paul was a theologian if you've ever imagined one, but his cup overflowed with sentiment when he spoke of local groups of believers who'd become so dear to him.

What were Paul's feelings toward the believers in Philippi (Phil. 1:3-8)?

PRINCIPAL
QUESTION

I love church. God has made it a refuge for me since childhood. I've never attended a perfect one and would have ruined it if I had. No, I don't always feel like going, and something monumental doesn't happen every time I go. Still, I am blessed and built up in spirit enough to tackle another vicious Monday morning. Nothing makes me happier than hearing from brand-new believers who have come to know Jesus through their small group. If you're among them, I hope you've had time enough in your walk with God to get plugged into a local body of believers. If you haven't, please don't let the dust settle, but in the meantime answer the following questions in terms of what you hope to find in a local church and bring to a local church.

Accepting that no fellowship of believers is perfect, what are a few things you really love about yours?

Name some people you look forward to seeing each time you go and explain why.

One of the things I like best about a functioning church home is the invitation to form relationships with people I might otherwise miss—with people altogether different than me. For instance, I have a whole set of girlfriends ranging from ages 7-12 that I talk to every Sunday and several of them—via text message—during the week.

What about you? Describe a few relationships you have at church that you wouldn't have anywhere else.

PERSONAL
QUESTION

Here's the bottom line according to Today's Treasure. Are you glad when someone says to you, "Let's go to the house of the LORD"?

While few people are enthusiastically anxious to roll out of bed every Sunday after an exhausting week, do you ordinarily look forward to going to church?

Almost never

Sometimes

Usually

Almost always

If your answer is “almost never” or perhaps even “sometimes,” this lesson may be more important for you. Church is a huge part of the believer’s life—as big as your workplace or the neighborhood where you live. I can confidently say that God is not without an opinion about how you invest your life in a spiritual community. Ask Him about what He wants you to do about church. If you aren’t looking forward to church, maybe He can show you what you can do to change the situation. Sometimes He requires a change in us. Sometimes the Father even uses our dissatisfaction to show us He wants to move us to another ministry in another place.

Note how the psalmist began with a focus on the temple or “house of the LORD” and then widened his focus to the city surrounding it. We’re going to follow suit. In Jeremiah 29 God gave profound and timely instructions through His prophet to the people of God in Babylonian captivity. In some respects you and I may think of ourselves as exiles, not because of disobedience to God but because we are citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20) with ankles chained to earth.

What was God’s essential point to the exiles in Babylon (Jer. 29:4-7)?

How can we draw a parallel between verse 7, Psalm 122:6, and our own cities?

In our previous lesson we talked about how God fits us with our personalities, uses our pasts, and plants our feet in places to fashion us into servants who can do some good. I was raised in a small Arkansas town where I attended ninth grade with most of the same people I sat next to in kindergarten. Smack in the middle of my high school years my parents packed my little brother and me in the old Buick and headed to Houston, Texas—the biggest city in the South. Talk about life interrupted!

Many years passed before I saw God’s wisdom in exposing me widely to both environments. Because all my formative years were in a smaller town, I am very comfortable serving in those environments. I’ve seen life from the stands of the local football field where everybody cheers for one high school team. From that smaller environment, I’ve also seen life from the neighborhood street corner where everybody not only knows your name but also your business. Good, bad, and the ugly—I hated to let it go. I’ve done life since then from six lanes of crowded overpasses where we honk a crude brand of Morse code to one another.

Let’s face it. Most of us have a love-hate relationship with the places we’ve gotten our mail, but God intended to use every stop to equip us as servants. You have been

assigned to your town or your city, and equally, it has been assigned to you. You may feel like an exile within its city limits, but just as God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, He wants to prosper you there. His method may not be through all your city can do to edify and serve you. It may be what you can do to build up your city—one neighbor, one teacher, one trash collector at a time. Please give these two questions some thought:

How is God using your town or city to equip you to be a humble servant?

How is God using you in your town or city? _____

Remember, you don't have to be on the school board or in city government for God to use you. He ministers to cities just as readily by ministering to neighbors. The point is to understand that we've been called by God's purpose to the places we live.

We've practiced our first two approaches to Psalm 122. We've said it and worked it. Now as you "pray it," update the psalm to reflect your own church and city. Speak blessing over your city as the psalmist did. Then fill in your stair graphic.

Fabulous job today, Dear One. Keep stepping up.

My Psalm 122



**TREASURE**

"I lift my eyes to You,
the One enthroned
in heaven."

Psalm 123:1, HCSB

Day Two

The One Enthroned

Today we place our right foot on the fourth stair as we study Psalm 123. I'm anxious to discuss the material with you and don't want to waste a moment getting started. I so hope you're still taking your place on your face and having some breakthroughs with God you might not otherwise have.

Go ahead and plunge into both of the following translations of Psalm 123: Say it; then *work it*. Toward the conclusion of day 3, we'll *pray it*.

PSALM 123 (HCSB)

- 1 I lift my eyes to You,
the One enthroned in heaven.
- 2 Like a servant's eyes on His master's hand,
like a servant girl's eyes on her mistress's hand,
so our eyes are on the LORD our God
until He shows us favor.
- 3 Show us favor, LORD, show us favor,
for we've had more than enough contempt.
- 4 We've had more than enough
scorn from the arrogant
and contempt from the proud.

PSALM 123 (The Amplified Bible)

- 1 Unto You do I lift up my eyes,
O You Who are enthroned in heaven.
- 2 Behold, as the eyes of servants
look to the hand of their master,
and as the eyes of a maid
to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the Lord our God,
until He has mercy and loving-kindness for us.
- 3 Have mercy on us,
O Lord, have mercy on and loving-kindness for us,
for we are exceedingly satiated with contempt.
- 4 Our life is exceedingly filled with the scorning
and scoffing of those who are at ease
and with the contempt of the proud
(irresponsible tyrants who disregard God's law).

**PRINCIPAL
QUESTION**

In one phrase or sentence, what do you consider to be the theme of Psalm 123?

Today consider verses 1 and 2 of this rich psalm. Psalm 123 falls into the genre of songs of lament, but the focus is God Himself. The first question is this: Where are we looking? Right now in the challenge that surrounds me and all that busies me or injures me, where am *I* looking? Where are *my* attentions focused?

Without a hint of condemnation, let's plunge beneath our rote spiritual answers to what's true. When every natural instinct begs us to stare wide-eyed in the face of our circumstances, demands, oppressors, and false saviors, what—or who—ultimately wins our focus? These questions are vital because much of our soul's basic welfare is wrapped up in our answers.

I'd like to suggest that an entire chain reaction begins with our eyes and ultimately affects our hearts, souls, and minds. *Where we look*—where we genuinely fasten our gaze—amid continual life challenges has a tremendous impact on *how we feel*.

*Have you discovered a strong relationship in the concept of the statement
Where I look impacts How I feel? If so, how? Try to get specific.*

PERSONAL QUESTION

I am convinced that one reason *where we look* has such an impact on *how we feel* is because where we look is also primarily where we listen. Stay with me here and let me see if I can illustrate the point in Scripture.

Read Acts 3:1-7. This is a perfect time to take a glance at your temple diagram. Describe where this encounter between Peter, John, and the beggar took place.

Now look carefully at Acts 3:4. What did Peter say to the beggar?

Complete Acts 3:5: "So the man _____, expecting to get something from them" (NIV).

Verse 3 tells us the man “saw” them and asked them for money but obviously with half a glance, half a heart, and probably less than half an expectation. Until Peter demanded his attention, the crippled man simply did what he did “every day” (v. 2). By reading verse 5 carefully, you’ll see that the man gave Peter and John neither his full attention nor his great expectation until he looked straight at them.

Therefore, he *looked*, which caused him to more effectively *listen*, which in turn altered his *feelings*, manifesting in a change in his *expectation*. Needless to say, the beggar got far more than he expected, but until he “gave them his attention” he had no real expectation of anything out of the ordinary.

Look at each of the following phrases and the impact they have on one another.

Where I look → What I hear → What I feel → What I expect

How could the same concepts in your approach to God impact your life?

Like the crippled man begging at the Gate Beautiful, we can rise up early in the morning and keep our routine prayer time, say all the right things yet remain so focused on our circumstances that nothing ever changes. Let's hear our wonderful God say to us today, "Look at Me!" How worthy is He of our gaze?

How is God described in Psalm 123:1?

During staff prayer time a few days ago I told my coworkers at Living Proof Ministries that I never want us to get so "spiritual" and think ourselves so mature that we lose touch with the common questions and concerns of the masses that we've been called to serve. Many people secretly wonder, *Who is God that we should seek Him first?* Or in today's lesson's terminology, "Who is God that we should look to Him alone?" Certainly people struggle with the question, "Who is God that we should obey Him as servants?" Simply put, who does God think He is?

While respectful men and women may be scared to voice such questions aloud, Scripture is not the least bit reluctant to offer answers. God tells us exactly who He thinks—and knows—He is. He does not call us to worship and serve ignorantly and stumble before Him blindly. Students of sound biblical theology will discover that Christianity is a thinking and reasoning person's belief system.

Psalm 123:1 intimates that one chief reason God is worthy of being the One to whom we lift our eyes and fix our focus is because He is "enthroned in heaven." Let's take this one description of God and see what else the psalms have to say about it.

List what the following psalms tell us about God's enthronement.

Psalm 22:3-4

Psalm 29:10

Psalm 99:1

Psalm 113:4-6

Circle the key word in this term: enthroned.

Enthroned on high and between the cherubim, God rules over the entire universe. You can't be "enthroned" without a "throne" (the key word). Like the 24 elders pictured in Revelation 4:10-11, ultimately every other crown bearer will "fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever." They will "lay their crowns before the throne and say: 'You are worthy, our Lord and God.'"

Nothing operates outside God's sovereign rule, including any prince or principality of earth or air, and yet God is the ultimate exception to the saying that "absolute power corrupts absolutely." Psalm 22:3 (NIV) tells us, God is "enthroned as the Holy One." He cannot be unholy in any dimension of His authority.

These are a few of the reasons why He is worthy of our fixed attentions. These are also a few of the reasons why everything else will downsize into its proper place when we look to God alone. Just as God is enthroned over the flood, He is enthroned over everything that troubles you.

What is one of your foremost concerns? (Complete the following sentence.)

Lord, You are the Holy One and You are alertly and lovingly enthroned over

God calls us to look to Him, seek and find in Him, but He wants us to approach on His terms based on who He really is. Not as we think we'd like to make Him. Eugene Peterson frames it beautifully. Reflect on his words in the next two paragraphs.

"We are not presented with a functional god who will help us out of jams or an entertainment god who will lighten our tedious hours. We are presented with the God of exodus and Easter, the God of Sinai and Calvary. If we want to understand God, we must do it on his terms. If we want to see God the way he really is, we must look to the place of authority—to Scripture and to Jesus Christ.

"And do we really want it any other way? I don't think so. We would very soon become contemptuous of a god whom we could figure out like a puzzle or learn to use like a tool. No, if God is worth our attention at all, he must be a God we can look up to—a God we *must* look up to ... The moment we look up to God (and not over at him, or down on him) we are in the posture of servitude."²

Peterson doesn't mean God can't or won't get us out of jams. But if that's all we make of Him, we've missed the true enormity of God. Think about what Peterson said about figuring God out like a puzzle. Consider afresh that God was just as intentional about what He didn't tell us in Scripture as what He did. You might say that what is missing and unexplained on the pages of Scripture is in some ways just as inspired as what you find in ink. Who else is so brilliant, so multidimensional and gloriously mysterious that you could spend your entire life studying and never grasp His vastness?

Ask yourself two questions as I pose the same ones to myself, and let's be honest in our personal assessment.

What do you think you'd do if you thought you had God completely figured out?

What if you could learn to use God like a tool and get anything you wanted?

God is so wise, isn't He? As wise in what He's hidden as in what He's disclosed. As wise in what He doesn't do as what He does. Make no mistake. He is all-powerful and ever willing to use that power on behalf of His children. We see glimpses of this accessibility intimated in Psalm 123. Consider comments from *The Eerdmans Critical Commentary* of this brief psalm of ascent.

"The singer affirms his total devotion to the Lord, and he wants to obtain a vision of the divine presence. ... His eyes are fixed on God's hands. To lift up the eyes is a gesture of deep longing. While God is enthroned in the heavens—a sign of his kingship—his transcendence is not inaccessible. God's crowd of helpers, like royal attendants, wait for a single hint before going into action."³

How do you respond to these thoughts?

"I lift my eyes to You,

the One enthroned

in heaven."

Psalm 123:1, HCSB

After the psalmist set his gaze on the One enthroned in heaven in Psalm 123:1, he affirmed his position as His servant in verse 2. Did you notice the contrast between the plural reference to "slaves" (in this context men only) and their master and the singular reference to the "maid" and her mistress? John Eaton explains, "The male servants are more numerous for the work in the fields; the single maid assisting her mistress in the house may have come with her at the marriage."⁴

I have no idea how a man would look at the reference to his role as servant in this verse, but as a woman I am tendered by the image of just one feminine servant sitting at the hand of her master (rather than a mistress, of course, as we draw our own parallel). I don't want to make too much of it because the psalm is not making much of it; but something in every woman longs to see herself for just a moment as the only one at her dearest love's hand. Take that opportunity, Dear One, right this moment.

Yes, you and I have the joy of laboring beside many wonderful fellow servants, but perhaps today your feminine heart needs to see itself—all by yourself—right there at the hand of your Master, Jesus. Yes, you look to Him as do many others around you. But I think it might be all right today if you also imagined that there are times when He only has eyes for you. Somehow in His limitless capacity to love, nurture, and watch over us, Christ can attend to each of us as if we are the only one in the world.

Take a moment today as you conclude and sense Christ's gaze upon you, His Beloved.

Day Three

Much Contempt

Today we plant both feet firmly on Psalm 123. In our last lesson I received a fresh instruction from God about becoming more deliberate in setting my gaze. If I have low expectations, skewed feelings, and impaired spiritual hearing, my eyes are either looking in at myself or out at people and circumstances. I hope you're getting some insight from the words of the psalmist too. God wants our eyes fixed upward like someone down on her knees at His feet.

We tend to focus on the most obvious. God wants to equip us with a vision that sees higher, deeper, and broader than our physical realities. According to Ephesians 1:18, we can have the eyes of our hearts enlightened. Perhaps that's the essence of true vision: seeing clearest of all with the eyes of our hearts.

On day 2 we focused on Psalm 123:1-2. Today we turn our attentions to verses 3 and 4. Please turn back to your previous lesson, choose one translation of Psalm 123 and read it in its entirety.

As we zero in on the second half of the psalm, what specific reason did the psalmist give for requesting mercy? Choose one answer.

- They had sinned grievously. They were in physical danger.
- They were in captivity. They had endured much contempt.

I can't imagine we'll have any trouble relating to the psalmist today. Scripture may use different wording than our day-to-day vocabulary, but the actions and the feelings described in Psalm 123 are thoroughly familiar to us. The Hebrew term translated "contempt" comes from a root that means "to disrespect."⁵

Surely we all know what it's like to be treated disrespectfully. Meditate on the word for a moment. Offer your own general definition of disrespect; then give two examples.

Definition: _____

Examples: _____

1. _____

2. _____



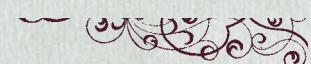
TODAY'S TREASURE

"Have mercy on us, O LORD, have mercy on us, for we have endured much contempt."

Psalm 123:3, NIV



PRINCIPAL QUESTION



*Disrespect is
not the same
as disagreement.
We can strongly
disagree and
still treat people
with respect.*

Disrespect is not the same as disagreement. We can strongly disagree and still treat people with respect. Disrespect devalues them. We can disrespect people in the way we talk to them or refuse to talk to them. Someone can say all the right things yet have a tone, expression, or manner that exudes disrespect. We can be disrespectful in the way we look at the person talking to us or even more disrespectful in our refusal to look. Disrespect is treating someone as inferior or simply not worth the courtesy. In a nutshell, it is the disregard of innate human value.

I'll never forget the time Keith, our daughters, and I were on a subway in Paris. Our girls were older teenagers at the time, and some of the men standing around them gawked inappropriately at them. Keith cleared his throat, stared the offenders down, and did everything possible to make sure they knew he was the father of those two girls. Still, they persisted. Keith was so furious I was afraid somebody was going to get off that train with a black eye. He could not fathom such disrespect. Later he said, "They kept staring at the girls with me, their father, standing right next to them. Those men could also clearly see that I disapproved. How much gall does that take?" Thankfully, we got off the subway in the nick of time before anybody got hurt. Trust me when I tell you the problem was not a language barrier. It was disrespect.

Hopefully by now all sorts of examples of disrespect are swimming around in your head. Picture that they are neither isolated occurrences nor relatively benign expressions of disrespect. Picture them constant and blatant. That's the kind of disrespect the psalmist is talking about.

Fill in the following blank according to the Amplified Bible's version of Psalm 123:3 in your previous lesson: "Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on and loving-kindness for us, for we are ...

In our words? *We're up to here with it! We've had it!* Ever felt that way? Boy, I have! I don't doubt I've caused others to feel that way at times. Today's lesson is for times when we are at the end of our rope with a situation and yet it's not a simple matter of just walking away. Maybe we've nearly had it with a situation at work, yet we want that job. Maybe we've nearly had it with a situation at home, yet we want that marriage. Maybe we're at our wits end with a friendship, but we hate to let the whole thing go over one frustrating area. On the other hand, maybe we'd really like to walk away, but it simply isn't God's will and we're trying to be obedient.

We can relate to the writer of Psalm 123 every time we want to echo the words of verse 4 (HCSB): *I've had more than enough.* Not just enough, Lord. *More than enough.* Think about when you've felt that way. Was one of the major issues a feeling that you were being disrespected? When a wife continues to catch a husband with pornography, along with the obvious sense of betrayal, doesn't she also battle an overwhelming sense that she's not respected? When a husband continues to be belittled by his wife, pressured to *make* more or *be* more, isn't she treating him with disrespect?

List another example when some expression of ongoing disrespect can lead a person to feel like he or she has had “more than enough.”

Psalm 123 is ink to the page for such a time as this. It stands as permission to come to God—not arrogantly or with our own expression of disrespect but on our knees—as a servant looks to her master. That's the perfect posture for saying, “Lord, I've got to have Your help. I've had more than enough. I'm not going to make it in this situation without You.”

Now let's look at a very specific expression of disrespect that I think is best worded in Psalm 123:4 by the NIV. “We have endured much *ridicule*” (emphasis mine). At first glance, ridicule seems relatively innocuous. It seems the lesser of contemptuous evils and something we ought to be able to take. A steady stream of ridicule, however, can become terribly oppressive. Ridicule can take us on a trip to “more than enough” in record time. Let's face it. All of us are quirky. Goodness knows, I provide ample fodder for someone to make fun of me. As you might imagine, my enthusiasm has been mocked a few times, and let's not even talk about my hair!

How about you? For what could others fairly readily ridicule you?

We're odd enough on our own. Add Christianity to the mix and we're a peculiar people indeed. You may be ridiculed at work or at school for having what some of your coworkers consider an archaic set of values. A friend of mine told me that in college she tried to get rid of her virginity as quickly as she could because people made so much fun of her. Or in a totally different vein, unbelieving friends or family members may ridicule you for what another Christian said or did in public. I've been there. A constant dose of ridicule can be hard to swallow. It's difficult enough for mature adults, but I'd like to suggest that ridicule can be toxic for children and adolescents. Even deadly.

Most of us doing this Bible study are women, and although many of us are not actively parenting within our homes, we find ourselves in all sorts of positions where we may see a young person being bullied. Schoolteachers, Sunday School teachers, principals, counselors, and nurses may see all sorts of evidences that a child is being harshly ridiculed. A neighbor can take note of something harmful happening to a child on the street or at the bus stop. We can't just take the child's word for it if he says it doesn't bother him. His actions and his demeanor speak louder than his words. Sometimes a child is so desperate to be liked and accepted that he'll put up with anything. What should we do? Go back to our knees like servants at the hands of our master and seek God's mercy and the revelation of His wisdom. The psalmists offer all sorts of ways we can relate personally, but sometimes we're more readily reminded of what someone else is enduring.



PERSONAL
QUESTION

Have you ever seen a person harshly ridiculed? If so, how?

What did you do or wish you could have done?

From now on, we can see something like you described as a perfect opportunity to turn the words of Psalm 123 into intercession. On another person's behalf, we can tell God that we think he or she has had *more than enough*. While we're at it, we can ask Him if we are meant to take any kind of action. Be sure to test what you think you've heard by lining it up against the Word, and in particularly volatile matters, consider seeking the counsel of someone you trust. If God wills you to action, have the courage to do what He leads.

In conclusion, let's look at the wider picture once again. At one time or another all of us have been targets of disrespect or ridicule. Furthermore, we who belong to God through Christ Jesus are all regarded as children to God. When His beloved child receives this kind of mistreatment, she is not without recourse. She has an Advocate. Tell God what is happening. Get the weight of it off your chest. See yourself as He sees you and picture Him standing between you and the person mistreating you. Ask for wisdom to know what to do. Also have the courage to ask God if you're unknowingly doing anything to invite it. When I was young, I had a victim mentality that seemed to issue one invitation after another for someone to hurt me. Needless to say, I had a string of people who were more than willing to RSVP. Other times the problem resides solely in another person and we're doing nothing to invite it. God can show us the difference.

Above all, when we've had *more than enough* disrespect or ridicule, we need to do exactly what the inspired writer of Psalm 123 did: feverishly seek God's mercy. When we ask for God's mercy according to the definition of the Hebrew word translated *mercy* in Psalm 123, we're asking for God's favor, for His kindness, and His grace. In fact, *grace* is probably the closest New Testament equivalent to the Old Testament term translated "mercy" in this psalm.⁶

Why would the favor, kindness, and grace of God be effective remedies when we feel disrespected or ridiculed? Explain briefly.

Eerdmans Critical Commentary offers these statements concerning the pleas for mercy in Psalm 123. “A repeated supplication, ‘Have mercy upon us’ could be rendered ‘Grace us!’ The Hebrew verb means not only ‘have mercy’ but also, in archaic English, ‘Grace us,’ that is to say ‘Transform us into thy treasure,’ make us receive this divine quality that incorporates us into thy closest family.”⁷

Beloved, according to God’s precious Word, if you belong to Jesus Christ, you’ve already been transformed into God’s treasure. You are already the closest of family. Romans 8:17 says, “If we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.” As we fellowship in His sufferings, we will inevitably experience various expressions of disrespect and ridicule from time to time, but we are not helpless. We know where to go. And we’re going to go there today.

Glance back over your two lessons on Psalm 123. Think about some of the things God has revealed to you and unearthed in you; then speak to Him from those very depths as you write your own rendition of Psalm 123. If it simply doesn’t apply to you right now, without using his or her name, pray it for someone else you know who is treated with disrespect. Don’t forget to fill in your stair graphic for Psalm 123 with a phrase describing what you most want to take with you from this psalm.

My Psalm 123



DAY 5

TREASURE

"If the LORD had not been on our side when men attacked us, then they would have swallowed us alive."

Psalm 124:2-3, HCSB

PSALM 124:1-8 (HCSB)

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

Day Four If the Lord Had Not

We've arrived at the fifth step in our ascent to the next level with God. I am already completely captivated by the material. I've

begun to talk to God about things I've never thought to address with Him before. My deep hope is that God is captivating you too. He delights in your pursuit of Him, Precious One. Don't think for a moment He is inattentive as you throw open your Bible and seek to hear His voice amid so many voices competing for your attention. God is ready and waiting for you every time you approach Him and He promised if you seek Him and His righteousness first, He will add everything else of value to your life (see Matt. 6:33). Let's put our right foot on the next step. Please read both translations of Psalm 124 and apply your first two approaches.

PSALM 124:1-8 (The Message)

- 1 A pilgrim song of David. If God hadn't been
for us —all together now, Israel, sing out!—
- 2 If God hadn't been for us when everyone went
against us,
- 3 We would have been swallowed alive by their
violent anger,
- 4 Swept away by the flood of rage, drowned
in the torrent;
- 5 We would have lost our lives in the wild,
raging water.
- 6 Oh, blessed be God! He didn't go off and leave
us. He didn't abandon us defenseless, helpless
as a rabbit in a pack of snarling dogs.
- 7 We've flown free from their fangs, free of their
traps, free as a bird. Their grip is broken;
we're free as a bird in flight.
- 8 God's strong name is our help, the same God
who made heaven and earth.

I love the version from The Message. It helps you hear the psalm more readily as a song, doesn't it? Glance back at the first verse. Can't you hear the worship leader beginning the song and then coaxing the congregation to sing it like they mean it? *Louder, Israel! Every voice! All together now!* The image makes me smile.

Tom Mosley, the music and worship pastor at my home church, is one of my favorite people in the world. He has a wonderfully warm way of not letting our congregation get away with unenthusiastic, insincere worship. I can picture him saying something like, "I'm going to give you a second chance to sing that to God with all the affection and gratitude your heart can muster." That's a little of what the inspired writer of Psalm 124 was saying. I can almost hear him chide, "If God hasn't been good to you, don't bother. If He's never rescued you, save your breath. But if He has, and you know He has, lift your voices and give Him the praise due His name!"

I am so glad we have two days to consider this psalm because we're going to need ample time to relate and meditate. In his book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Eugene Peterson calls Psalm 124 "a song of hazard—and of help."⁸ His description provided me with two perspectives to guide our two-day study on this wonderful song. Today we will focus on the hazards described in Psalm 124 and tomorrow we'll cast our gaze on the help. Take a look back at the HCSB translation of Psalm 124. The psalmist employed several metaphors or images to help us vividly picture the kind of peril that surrounds us.

List the metaphors in the left column. When you've finished your list, look up the Scriptures in the right-hand column and draw a line matching each metaphor to the one it reflects in Psalm 124.

Psalm 124 Metaphors

Similar Metaphors:

- Psalm 18:16-17
Psalm 55:6-8
Psalm 57:4



PRINCIPAL
QUESTION



In Psalm 124 the psalmist described the vicious attacks of men like gaping jaws that seek to swallow us whole, like raging waters seeking to drown us, like teeth that try to rip us to shreds, and like fowlers' snares trying to capture us.

When was the last time you felt like someone or something was going to eat you alive? Describe the situation without using any names.

When was the last time you felt like a situation was honestly going to drown you?

"The engulfing waters
threatened me, the
deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped
around my head."

Jonah 2:5, NIV

Jonah experienced this kind of torrent in the most literal sense. Your feet may never have touched salt water, yet surely somewhere along the way you've felt so tossed by angry waves that you could almost feel the seaweed wrapped around your head. Even now you may have to push it up out of your eyes to read your lesson. You caught the reference to human attack in Psalm 124:2. Our battle is not with flesh and blood but with powers of darkness (Eph. 6:10-12), but Satan successfully enlists human help in his scheme against us.

Our toughest challenges most often involve people rather than circumstances. People are much more difficult to get over than inanimate situations. Even if we haven't experienced many people's vicious attacks, we've encountered Satan's, whether or not we've realized it. We must let God open our eyes wide to the reality that we have a powerful enemy who—let me say this clearly—absolutely hates us.

Let's recapture what it feels like to be hated. Think back on your history with people for a moment because attack is much easier to identify in human terms.

*Have you ever felt like another person despised you? yes no
If so, describe some of your feelings when you first realized it.*

I've had the experience a few times, particularly in ministry. My feelings invariably get hurt and my first inclination is to ask, "Why? What have I done?" I am a dyed-in-the-wool people person. Sanguine to the bone, only on rare occasion do I fight a strong feeling of dislike for someone. I can only think of a couple of times that I've felt as if I honestly could not stand someone. So I always wonder—however naively—why he or she seems to detest me so. I also ask myself (and usually Keith, my sounding board) if I'm imagining it or if it's real. Let's settle something right here:

We who belong to Christ are not imagining that we have an enemy who hates us. We do. We also don't have to wonder why. Satan hates us because God loves us. He also hates us because we remind him of the position he lost. He was an anointed cherub. We are anointed children. He lost his place in heaven. Through Christ, we gained a place in heaven. Perhaps above all, Satan hatefully attacks us because he can't touch God. The closest he can come to hurting God is to hurt one of His children. Zechariah 2:8 says whoever touches one of God's children touches the apple of His eye. God will overlook an attack against you about as readily as He would overlook someone repeatedly poking Him in the eye.

When you feel attacked, how convinced are you that God is taking it personally and that you can trust Him to handle it as you seek and submit to Him?



As we grow increasingly convinced of the veracity of God's Word and His unwavering faithfulness, our times of turmoil will be considerably more bearable as He empowers us to confidently circle that "10." Let's make that confidence a goal.

Eugene Peterson says, "Among the Songs of Ascents, sung by the people of God on the way of faith, this is one that better than any other describes the hazardous work of all discipleship."⁹ You and I have no idea the very real drama that surrounds us. The scenarios that we pay to see at the movies will ultimately pale in comparison to what Christian pilgrims have endured on our journeys to Mount Zion.

A vicious battle is being fought over your life—and right over your seaweed-wrapped head. You are not imagining that something's going on, and yes, it's more than meets the eye. From heaven's vantage point, your story is exceedingly more exciting than you can conceive—replete with dangers, near misses, and great escapes. As many bruises, scars, and successful hits as the enemy may have given us, as we study this psalm, I want you to celebrate that Satan didn't get all he wanted. That you're sitting here doing this Bible study is one of many proofs. The Devil had no such intention. He meant to destroy you.

Describe one time you were most aware of Satan's harmful intent.

As much as your enemy may have stolen from you, think of something you believe in retrospect he wanted that he didn't get.

One distinguishing element of Psalm 124 is its invitation to the reader to consider some what-if scenarios. It is "a narrative about what might have occurred without YHWH's aid."¹⁰ "Throughout the psalm the praise is for deliverance from an *unrealized* condition that *might have been*"¹¹ (my emphasis). The following is a close rendering of the Hebrew in Psalm 124:2. "It was YHWH, but if it had not been ..."¹²

I want to spend the rest of our lesson thinking about what might have been had God not rescued you. The purpose will be to jump on the page of Psalm 124, relate completely, and praise God with that same kind of fervor. Like me, you may feel that Satan got an ample leash and multiple punches. But Psalm 124 suggests that much worse would have happened without God on our side. I'll go first; then it's your turn.

Before God interrupted my vocational path and told me I'd work for Him, I was majoring in pre-law, hotly pursuing the courtroom with my sights set on the politics. Had I remained unhealed from my past childhood abuse, I'm convinced I would have tried to prosecute my perpetrator over and over vicariously through similar situations. I would have taken my own lack of emotional health out on my profession. I was destined to be a crusader; and just like historical crusaders, I would have sinned grievously and called it righteous indignation. I don't believe that the thought of a defendant's innocence ever would have occurred to me in an accusation of abuse.

On a personal level, I believe I would have divorced several times as a means of self-fulfilling the prophecy that all men are rats. (Thank You, God, for saving me from such a sick assessment.) I most certainly would have been immoral, and yet because I had a heart for God, I would have nearly cried my eyes out about it later. Furthermore, I would have done every bit of this as the Christian I'd been since childhood. I'm not describing what my future would have been apart from salvation. I'm describing what my future would have been without the rip-roaring radical deliverance of Jesus Christ and His complete overthrow of every false Christ in my life.

PERSONAL QUESTION

What about you? What might have happened with your life “if the LORD had not been on [your] side”?

Now we can come alongside the writer of Psalm 124. Is God's interruption in the scenario you just described cause for praise? Conclude doing exactly that.



Day Five Praise the Lord

**TODAY'S
TREASURE**
“Praise the Lord,
who has not let us
be ripped apart
by their teeth.”

Psalm 124:6, HCSB

I've thought so much about our previous lesson. Imagining what our lives might have been like “if the LORD had not been on our side” is chilling, isn't it? Perhaps some of us still don't see ourselves falling into a pit of sin without God's radical deliverance, but outcomes of bitterness, coldness, and mean-spiritedness can be just as destructive as ethical and moral sins. In some ways they're more insidious because they're less recognizable. Think how despairing or self-destructive we would have become had God not rescued us.

I often reflect on how God delivered me from myself as much as from Satan. I would have ended up being my own worst enemy. For many years Satan got tremendous cooperation from me, but I finally came to a place where I vowed *no more*.

*Has Satan effectively tempted you to oppose your own best interests? ○ yes ○ no
If so, did you get fed up with being your own worst (earthly) enemy and decide to let God bring you some healing? ○ yes ○ no What was the turning point?*

If you've not come to that turning point, don't feel condemned. Each of us holds an invitation to take the next step with God. This journey may be to step out of self-destruction and constant defeat and step up to more consistent victory.

In our introductory session we talked about three historical associations with the Psalms of Ascent. Check the three from the choices below. Try to complete this exercise from memory, but check your notes from the introductory session if the answers don't come easily. The Psalms of Ascent were ...

- associated with the 15 steps of the temple
- a compilation of David's songs when King Saul pursued him
- songs sung at the last supper
- songs sung on the pilgrimage to the Three Great Feasts
- songs sung by exiles returning to Jerusalem from captivity

The third association we made in our introductory session was vital. The Psalms of Ascent are strongly associated with the exiles returning from captivity. If you checked the first, fourth, and fifth associations in the previous exercise, you were correct.

If you have been in the clutches of defeat, you have not come to this study through a side door. God threw open the front door for you. You belong in this study, and if you will let Him, God will usher you to a whole new level of freedom. Persevere in the study. Attend each session. Do your homework. Fully engage and God will astound you. Let Him have His healing way over the next four weeks and watch what He will do.

Now let's set both feet on the fifth step. We spent our first day on the hazards a child of God faces and where we'd be had God not intervened. Today we center on the specific kind of help emphasized in Psalm 124. We've already talked about God's help in a couple of psalms, but we've only scratched the surface. God's help is all encompassing; it comes in so many forms and scriptural assurances that we could study nothing else for the remainder of our study and never run out of material. You will discover that many psalms centering on God's help emphasize a different element of divine aid. The kind of help Psalm 124 describes is very distinct. We read it yesterday, but I've purposely waited until today to camp on it.

Complete the following sentences drawn from verse 2.

HCSB: "If the LORD had not been _____ ... "

The Message: "If God hadn't been _____ when everyone went against us."

~ ~ ~
PRINCIPAL
QUESTION



Imagine standing on a battlefield all alone facing an angry army of 1,000 men, each breathing torturous threats. Suddenly you feel the earth pound beneath your feet like the hoofbeats of 10,000 horsemen. Your heart nearly melts with fear as you prepare yourself for the ever-mounting foe. Then you realize it wasn't 10,000 horsemen after all. It was one. Your gaze lifts higher and higher as you try to focus on His face with the sun in your eyes. He looks 100 feet tall atop His stallion, and His very presence emanates authority. He is stunningly beautiful. Staggeringly powerful. His horse gallops onto the battlefield, kicking up the earth. The rider firmly pulls the reins and brings His horse to a halt right beside you. The horseman then looks down at you and says, "Proceed into battle, mighty warrior. I am on your side."

What does Joshua 23:10 say?

*When we call on
His name, God
promises believers
power and victory
in the terrifying
battles of the
spiritual realm.
He promised we'd
be more than
conquerors.*

When we call upon His name, God promises New Testament believers that same kind of power and victory in the far more terrifying battles of the spiritual realm. He didn't just promise we'd be conquerors. He promised we'd be *more than* conquerors. Christ will never take us into a battle we cannot win. We would have to choose defeat against our new nature. Why aren't we living with that kind of confidence? If I were a betting woman (something my grandmother always used to say), I'd wager a small fortune on the validity of this statement:

Regardless of how long we've been Christians and how deeply we've studied God's Word, most of us don't really believe down in the marrow of our bones that God is entirely, wholeheartedly, and unwaveringly on our side.

We live most of our lives unconvinced that God is really *for us*. We have little trouble picturing ourselves on God's side, but for the life of us we can't picture God stooping down enough to be on ours. Even though we'll say things and sing things to the contrary, we live as if we believe down in the hidden places of our hearts and minds that God at best tolerates us. And lucky we are at that!

We may rarely admit it, but our actions, anxieties, fears, and insecurities suggest something else. Perhaps some of us don't so much feel as if God is *against us* as we just don't necessarily feel as if He's *for us*. We conclude that the only person God is truly for is Himself and rightly so, we reason.

Somewhere deep inside I think we're secretly convinced that God created man with very high hopes only to have them dashed. Forget divine foreknowledge and a Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. We proved a terrible disappointment to God, but because He is faithful to His covenant, He's obligated to see the plan to completion. Therefore, He tolerates us because He's stuck with us.

Be completely honest. Have you ever felt the way I just described? Think about how you often feel in the hidden recesses of your heart and what your actions, faith practices, and accepted limitations suggest.

On the scale below, estimate the position you tend to picture God taking with you.

God is against me

God tolerates me

God is for me

Meditate over your history with God for a moment. Regardless of where you marked the continuum, name a couple of things that helped shape that conclusion:

If you marked that you are most often convinced (actions bearing witness) that “God is for [you]” on the continuum, you’ve already answered this question.

Despite how we feel much of the time, can the rest of us think of a few times when we’d have to admit that God seemed to be on our side? Describe one of those times.

I’m hammering the point because I’d like to suggest that in our humanity we tend to determine whether God is *against* us, *for* us, or *tolerating* us based on how He appears to act in our circumstances. In other words, our litmus test for whether we think God is really for us is circumstantial evidence. If I don’t get the promotion, God was for the other guy. If the relationship doesn’t work out, God didn’t root for me. If the cancer treatment doesn’t take, I’m not a high priority to Him.

Give another similar assumption:

Don’t for a moment think I’m minimizing the confusion any of these examples can cause as we try to picture God “on our side.” John 13:7 continues to come to my mind with great relevance to our subject matter today.

Please write John 13:7 in the space below:

I well remember making decisions for my children they considered to be uncaring or even mean-spirited at the moment. I even used the words from time to time, “I am *for*

you, child. For heaven's sake, I'm your mother! Why wouldn't I want what's best for you?" I remember times when one of them would claim with great drama, "You hate me!" She was too young and immature to understand that my decision was *for* her.

What invariably hurt most was if one of the children charged me with making the decision selfishly because I didn't want to go to the extra trouble a yes answer would necessitate. Sometimes I couldn't convince them otherwise, so I'd have to temporarily live with them thinking poorly of me and questioning my motives. I wanted to be popular with my children. I didn't want to make decisions that could be misunderstood. Still, the future ramifications were worth the present misunderstanding.

On a much greater scale, God can take a similar position. He knows when something glorious in the future necessitates something difficult in the present. Because He knows the glory will be worth it, God will risk being misunderstood. Yes, God wants us to have joyful, satisfying lives, but He also wants us to have crowns to cast. Rewards to receive. Character to develop. Compassion to give. Testimonies to tell. In the midst of those painful processes, God makes bold promises.

PERSONAL QUESTION

Read Romans 8:28-39 and let God tell you what He'll do for you. Make this exercise personal by putting your name in the top blank and filling in the remainder with various promises God makes you in the portion from Romans. Turn each into an "I will" statement from God to you. I'll fill in the first one so you'll get the idea.

My child, _____

I will make sure all things work together for your good.

I will _____.

Love, God

Those are promises, Dear One. Promises God made straight to you. He is not against you. He does not just tolerate you. He doesn't stick around because He feels obligated to you. God is on your side because He chooses to be.

A few days ago I received word of a group in Cape Town, South Africa, going through the Bible study *Breaking Free*. The woman leading the study shared that a

prostitute wandered in off the street while the class was underway. The troubled woman was simply looking for a place to sit and rest her weary frame. As our wonderful God would have it, she ended up listening to the entire class, approached the leader, and said, "I can never go back to my old life."

When I heard the story, I wept. That, Beloved, is one reason I love Jesus so much. He is the ultimate Prince Charming to every woman, especially the one who forgot she was Cinderella. He looked with loving eyes on that lifeless woman, knowing all she'd ever said and done. He gazed beneath her sin into the brokenness that caused her to devalue herself so thoroughly. He'd given His whole life for her and wanted her to know that she was worth it to Him. Christ, the Spotless One and the Righteous King, saw beauty beneath her wounded, weathered exterior and sought to make her His own. As surely as Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, He drew a South African prostitute to the fountain of living Water and gave her a drink. Despite her self-destruction, Christ was for her. He was on her side when she was her own worst enemy. That's the way He is.

He's on your side.

Please conclude by writing Psalm 124 in your own words. Fill in the next step on your stair graphic with words best describing what you've learned from this psalm.

My Psalm 124

viewer guide

SESSION TWO

Our Eyes Look to the Lord

In our introduction we talked about the strong association between the Psalms of Ascent and the Three Great Feasts or Pilgrim Feasts. Today we will consider the first of those feasts; in sessions 3 and 4 we'll consider the next two. We will consider each of the feasts and the parallels they pose to us as New Testament sojourners on our way to the heavenly Jerusalem.

Part One

The Old Testament Emphasis on the Feast (*Read Lev. 23:4-11,14 and Deut. 16:1-4.*)

- The first of the Pilgrim Feasts was the Feast of _____
_____.
- This feast began at sundown at the conclusion of Passover and lasted for the next _____ days.
- They ate unleavened bread on the first Passover because they were to eat in _____, ready at any moment to _____.

Part Two

The New Testament Emphasis on the Feast

- See Luke 2:41 for the first mention of Jesus' own participation.
- See Matthew 16:5-9. Leaven became symbolic of _____. *The Feasts of the Lord* explains "In Hebrew, leaven is known as *chametz*, which literally means '_____.' Leaven (usually yeast or baking powder) is used to _____."

produce _____” *The Feasts of the Lord* goes on to say that “ancient rabbis also believed that leaven represents the _____ of the heart.”¹ This fermentation implied a process of _____.

- *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* adds an interesting picture of the process: The “leaven” consisted, so far as the evidence goes, of a piece of fermented dough _____ from a _____. The lump of dough thus preserved was either dissolved in water in the kneading trough before the flour was added, or was “_____” in the flour ... and kneaded along _____ it. Compare 1 Corinthians 5:7-8.

Part Three

The Symbolism Fulfilled in Christ

- Read Matthew 26:17,26; then consider Acts 2:29-33.
- Recall Leviticus 23:4-11.

According to *The Feasts of the Lord* ...

- (1) Passover pictures the _____ of the Messiah.
- (2) The Feast of Unleavened Bread pictures the _____ of the Messiah.
- (3) Firstfruits pictures the _____ of the Messiah.

(See 1 Cor. 15:20-24.)

1. Adapted from Kevin Howard and Marvin Rosenthal, *The Feasts of the Lord* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 65-72.