

A LONG OBEDIENCE IN THE SAME DIRECTION (Summary)

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The following content is a summary and partial abridgement of Eugene Peterson's book "A Long Obedience In The Same Direction." It is based solely on Peterson's work and any help that this content gives should be credited to God's grace through Peterson's effort. In other words, give God glory, thank Eugene Peterson and consider buying the book.

1: DISCIPLESHIP: WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU CAN RACE AGAINST HORESES?

The fifteen "Songs of Ascents" (Psalm 120-134) provide the study for developing discipleship in an instant society. The use of these Psalms is to aid in encouragement for a life of obedience to God. This obedience takes root over a long period of time and is often anything but instant. As you journey through these God-sung "songs" may your affections be stirred as you see your Savior and find in Him satisfaction in every sphere and season of life.

Tourist and Pilgrims:

One aspect of the world that is harmful to Christians is the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. It is not difficult in this environment to get someone interested in the message of the gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest. People have developed the lifestyle of a tourist and only want the high points. There is no desire to wait patiently and devoutly for a true relationship with God.

An essential thing in heaven and earth is that there would be a long obedience in the same direction resulting in something that makes life worth living. For recognizing the world's ways

there are two biblical designations for people of faith that are extremely useful: disciple and pilgrim.

Disciple: Says we are people who spend our lives apprenticed to our master, Jesus Christ. We are in a growing and learning relationship, always. A disciple is a learner, but not primarily in the academic setting of a school-room, but rather, at the work of a craftsman. We don't just acquire information about God but skills in faith.

Pilgrim: Being a pilgrim means being a person who spends their life going someplace, going to God, and whose path for getting there is the way of Jesus Christ. This is because Jesus is the "way and the truth and the life" (see John 14:5-6).

A Dog Eared Songbook:

The *shiray hammaloth*, or Songs of Ascents, is a resource to guide people in the Christian way and direct people of faith in the conscious and continuous effort that develops into maturity in Christ. The songs are numbered 120-134 in the book of Psalms. These fifteen songs were likely sung, possibly in order, by Hebrew pilgrims as they went up to Jerusalem to the great worship festivals.

However, the song was not only literal, it was also a metaphor: the trip to Jerusalem acted out a life lived upward toward God, an existence that advanced from one level to another in developing maturity. Three times a year faithful Hebrews would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. While doing this they refreshed their memories of God's saving ways at the Feast of Passover in the spring; they renewed their commitments as God's covenanted people at the Feast of Pentecost in early summer; they responded as a blessed community to the best that God had for them at the Feast of Tabernacles in the autumn. This picture of the Hebrews gives us a good look at life as a faith-journey. These songs convey a wide range of emotions and ideas to God. Singing them is a way both to express God's amazing grace and to quiet fears. Since

many essential items in Christian discipleship are incorporated in these songs, they provide a way to remember who we are and where we are going. Ultimately, the Songs of Ascents, teach us who we are in Christ because of the Gospel of Christ and that our ultimate destination is Christ so we can be with Christ.

Between the Times:

Everyone who travels as a pilgrim needs assistance and encouragement from time to time. Christians will recognize how appropriate these songs are during the between times. They are songs of transitions, brief hymns that provide courage, support and inner direction for getting us where God is leading us in Jesus Christ. For those who choose to live no longer as tourist but as pilgrims, the Songs of Ascents combine all the cheerfulness of a travel song with the practicality of a guidebook and map.

2: REPENTANCE: 'I'M DOOMED TO LIVE IN MESHECH" - PSALM 120

Psalm 120 (ESV)

1 In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.

2 Deliver me, O LORD,
from lying lips,
from a deceitful tongue.

3 What shall be given to you,
and what more shall be done to you,
you deceitful tongue?

4 A warrior's sharp arrows,
with glowing coals of the broom tree!

5 Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech,
that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!

6 Too long have I had my dwelling
among those who hate peace.

7 I am for peace,
but when I speak, they are for war!

A person has to be thoroughly disgusted with the way things are to find motivation to set out on the Christian way. They have to be fed up with ways of the world before they acquire an appetite for the world of grace. Psalm 120 is the product of such a person. This person, sick with lies, and crippled with hate. Cries out with pain that penetrates despair and stimulates a new beginning—a journey to God that becomes a life of peace.

The fifteen Songs of Ascents describe elements common to all those who apprentice themselves to the Lord Christ and who travel in the Christian way. The first of them is the prod that gets them going.

Lies Without Error:

I'm in trouble is the opening phrase. The last word is war. This is not a happy Psalm but an honest and necessary one. The distress that begins and ends the song is the painful awakening to the no-longer-avoidable reality that we have been lied to. The lie, everything is o.k. This lie covers up and perpetuates the deep wrong, disguises the violence, the war, and the rapacity.

Christian consciousness begins in the painful realization that what we had assumed was the truth is in fact a lie. Rescue me from the person who tells me of life and omits Christ, who is wise in the ways of the world and ignores the movement of the Spirit. They are lies because they claim to tell us who we are and omit everything about our origin in God and our destiny in God.

Lightning Illuminating the Crossroads:

God, revealed in his creative and redemptive work, exposes all the lies. The moment the word God is uttered, the world's towering falsehood is exposed; we see the truth. The truth is that God made and loves us. The point at which we need illumination is the point at which the paths of our lives fork. Psalm 120 is the decision to take one way over another. The people who follow the same path as the psalmist are people who take delight in God and are Christians.

A No That Is a Yes:

The first step toward God is a step away from the lies of the world. We move away from things that are strange and hostile. We recognize that this world that we live in is not our home. The

biblical word that describes our desire to say no to the world is repentance. Repentance is not an emotion. It is a decision. It is deciding that you have been in the wrong in supposing that you could manage your own life and be your own God. It is a realization that what God wants from you and what you want from God are no going to be achieved by doing the same old things, thinking the same old thoughts. Repentance is the most practical of all the words, and the most practical of all the acts.

Repentance, the first word in Christian immigration, sets us on the way to traveling in the light. It is a rejection that is also an acceptance, a leaving that develops into an arriving, a no to the world that is a yes to God.

3: PROVIDENCE: “GOD GUARDS YOU FROM EVERY EVIL” - PSALM 121

Psalm 121 (ESV)

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

2 My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

3 He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

4 Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

5 The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

6 The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

7 The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

8 The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.

The moment we say no to the world and yes to God, all our problems are solved, all our questions answered, all our troubles over. If this is what you believe about Christianity then you are wrong. We live in the same world as people who do not love Jesus, and are subject to the same perils that face them.

Psalm 121 is a quiet voice gently and kindly telling us that we are, perhaps, wrong in the way that we are going about the Christian life, and then, very simply, showing us the right way. For many, the first great surprise of the Christian life is in the form of troubles we meet. Psalm 121 helps us deal with this discovery.

Travelers' Advisory

Three possibilities for harm to travelers are referred to in the psalm. A person traveling on foot can at any moment step on a loose stone and sprain their ankle. A person traveling on foot under protracted exposure to the sun, can become faint with sunstroke. And a person traveling under pressure and anxiety can become emotionally ill. In reference to these hazards the psalm says, "He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.... The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day." Any Christian who is honest is challenged by this truth. We have all sprained our ankles and been stuck in perils that have affected us. This psalm is not saying that we will not face any adversity, it's saying that the evil of this world and the adversity we encounter will have no power over us because it has no power of God.

Help Form the Hills:

A person of faith encounters trouble and cries out help. A look to the hills for help ends in disappointment. For all their majesty and beauty, for all their quiet strength and firmness, they are finally just hills. Psalm 121 rejects a worship of nature, a religion of stars and flowers, a religion that makes the best of what it finds on the hills; instead it looks to the Lord who made heaven and earth. The Creator is Lord over time: he guards you when you leave and when you return, in your beginnings and in the end. God guards you from every evil.

The promise of the psalm is not that we shall never stub our toes but that no injury, no accident, no distress will ever have evil power over us, that is, will be able to separate us from God's purposes in us. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limits because He has no limits; He'll always be there to help you come through it.

Three times in Psalm 121 God is referred to by the personal name Yahweh, translated as LORD. Eight times he is described as the guardian, or as the one who guards. He is not an impersonal executive giving orders from on high; he is present help every step of the way we travel. All the water in all the oceans cannot sink a ship unless it gets inside. Nor can all the trouble in the world harm us unless it gets within us. From the point of our repentance God guards us from every evil.

The only serious mistake that we can make when illness comes, when anxiety threatens, when conflict disturbs our relationships with others is to conclude that God had gotten bored looking after us and has shifted his attention to a more exciting Christian, or that he is disgusted with our meandering obedience. Psalm 121 prevents this mistake: the mistake of supposing that God's interest in us waxes and wanes in response to our spiritual temperature.

We know that God created the universe and has accomplished our eternal salvation. But we can't believe that he cares to watch the soap opera of our daily lives. But Psalm 121 says that the same faith that works in the large things works in the small. As the psalmist says; "The LORD is your keeper....The LORD will keep you from all evil...The LORD will keep..."

Traveling Companion:

The Christian life is not a quiet escape to a garden where we can walk and talk uninterruptedly with our Lord. The Christian life is simply, going to God. We will face dangers, and troubles, just like those who do not call Christ their Savior, or fall at the feet of God their King. The difference

is that each step we walk, each breath we take, we know we are preserved by God, we know we are accompanied by God, we know we are ruled by God; and therefore no matter what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will guard us from every evil, He guards our very life.

Faith is the solid, massive, secure experience of God, who keeps all evil from getting inside us, who guards our life, who guards us when we leave and when we return, who guards us now and guards us always.

4: WORSHIP: "LET'S GO TO THE HOUSE OF GOD" - PSALM 122

Psalm 122 (ESV)

1 I was glad when they said to me,

 "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"

2 Our feet have been standing

 within your gates, O Jerusalem!

3 Jerusalem— built as a city

 that is bound firmly together,

4 to which the tribes go up,

 the tribes of the LORD,

as was decreed for Israel,

 to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

5 There thrones for judgment were set,

 the thrones of the house of David.

6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!

 "May they be secure who love you!

7 Peace be within your walls

 and security within your towers!"

8 For my brothers and companions' sake

 I will say, "Peace be within you!"

9 For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,

 I will seek your good.

Psalm 122 is the song of a person who decided to go to church and worship God. It is a psalm of worship and a demonstration of what people of faith everywhere, always do: gather to an

assigned place and worship their God. As Christians we must decide to worship God, faithfully and devoutly. It is one of the important acts in a life of discipleship.

An Instance of the Average:

A great deal of what we call Christian behavior has become part of our legal system and is embedded in our social expectations, both of which have strong and coercive powers. But worship is not forced. Everyone who worships does so because they want to. Worship is the single most popular act among Christians.

A Framework:

The psalm singles out three items: worship gives us a workable structure for life; worship nurtures our need to be in relationship with God; worship centers our attention on the decisions of God.

Jerusalem was the Hebrew word for the place of worship. When you went to Jerusalem, you encountered the great foundational realities: God created you, God redeemed you, God provided for you. The city itself was a kind of architectural metaphor for what worship is: All the pieces of masonry fit compactly, all the building stones fit harmoniously. There were no loose stones, no leftover pieces, no awkward gaps in the walls or the towers.

In worship all the different people who went to Jerusalem functioned as a single people in harmonious relationships. With all of are different backgrounds, economic status, ethnic heritage, we are still one people and we worship gather together as one whole. When we go to worship we get a working definition for our life: the way God created us, the way he leads us. We know where we stand.

A Command:

Worship is the place where we obey the command to praise God: “To give thanks to the name of the LORD—this is what it means to be Israel.” This command is a word telling us what we ought to do, and what we ought to do is praise. When we praise we are functioning at the center, we are in touch with the basic, core reality of our being.

Christians worship because they want to, not because they are forced to. But, they do not always worship because they feel like it. Feelings are great liars. If Christians worshipped only when they felt like it, there would be very little worship. We live in an “age of sensation.” We think that if we don’t feel something then there can be no authenticity in doing it. But God says that we can act ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting. When we obey the command to praise God in worship, our deep, essential need to be in relationship with God is nurtured.

A Word of God:

When we worship our attention is centered on the decisions of God. Every time we worship our minds are informed, our memories refreshed with the judgments of God, we are familiarized with what God says, what he has decided, the way he is working out our salvation. We want to hear what God says and what he says to us: worship is the place where our attention is centered on these personal and decisive words of God.

Peace and Security:

Worship does not satisfy our hunger for God—it whets our appetite. Our need for God is not taken care of by engaging in worship—it deepens. Our basic needs suddenly become worthy of the dignity of creatures made in the image of God: peace and security. *Shalom*, or peace, is one of the richest words in the Bible. It gathers all aspects of wholeness that result from God’s will being completed in us. It is the work of God that, when complete, releases streams of living

water in us and pulsates with eternal life. *Shalvah*, or prosperity, is the foundation of security. It is the feeling that everything is going to be all right. Worship initiates an extended, daily participation in peace and prosperity so that we share in our daily rounds what God initiates and continues in Jesus Christ.

5: SERVICE: “LIKE SERVANTS WE’RE WATCHING & WAITING” - PSALM 123

Psalm 123 (ESV)

1 To you I lift up my eyes,
O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

2 Behold, as the eyes of servants
look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a maidservant
to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the LORD our God,
till he has mercy upon us.

3 Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.

4 Our soul has had more than enough
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.

As a person grows and matures in the Christian way, it is necessary to acquire certain skills. One is service. Psalm 123 is an instance of service. In this, as so often in the Psalms, we are not instructed in what to do, we are provided an instance of what is done. In Psalm 123 we observe that aspect of the life of discipleship that takes place under the form of servanthood.

If God Is God At All:

Service begins with an upward look to God. We need to place him in the appropriate role. God is over us or above us not beside us or below us. God is not a servant to be called into action when we are too tired to do something ourselves, not an expert to be called on when we find

we are ill equipped to handle a specialized problem in living. God did not become a servant so that we could order him around but so that we could join him in a redemptive life.

If God is God at all, he must know more about our need than we do; he must be more in touch with the reality of our thoughts, our emotions, our bodies than we are; he must have a more comprehensive grasp of the interrelations in our families and communities and nations than we do.

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. The moment we look up to God (and not over him, or down on him) we are in the posture of servitude.

Mercy, God, Mercy!

A second element in service in has to do with our expectation. What we expect is mercy. Three times this expectation is voiced in Psalm 123. The basic conviction of a Christian is that God intends good for us and that he will get his way in us. He is a potter working with the clay of our lives, forming and reforming until, he has shaped a redeemed life, a vessel fit for the kingdom.

The word *mercy* means that the upward look to God in the heavens does not expect God to stay in the heavens but to come down, to enter our condition, to accomplish the vast enterprise of redemption, to fashion in us his eternal salvation. Servitude is specific in its expectation, and what it expects is mercy.

Urgent Service:

A third element in the servant life is urgency. The Psalms is part of a vast literature of outcry, a longing for deliverance from oppression. The Christian is a person who recognizes that our real problem is not in achieving freedom but in learning service under a better master. The Christian

realizes that every relationship that excludes God becomes oppressive. For this reason all Christian service involves urgency. The urgency of trading a master that kills us for the Master that died for us.

Reasonable Service:

The service we offer to God (in worship) is extended into specific acts that serve others. We learn a relationship—an attitude toward life, a stance of servitude before God, and then we are available to be of use to others in acts of service. The Psalm has nothing in it about serving others. It concentrates on being a servant to God. Its position is that if the attitude of servanthood is learned, by attending to God as Lord, then serving others will develop as a very natural way of life.

The Freest Person On Earth:

For freedom is the freedom to live as persons in love for the sake of God and neighbor, not a license to grab and push. It is the opportunity to live at our best, not as unruly beasts. The work of liberation must therefore be accompanied by instruction in the use of liberty as children of God who “walk by the Spirit.”

As Psalm 123 prays the transition from oppression, to freedom, to a new servitude, it puts us in the way of learning how to use our freedom most appropriately, under the lordship of a merciful God. A servant Christian is the freest person on earth.

6: HELP: "OH, BLESSED BE GOD! HE DIDN'T GO OFF AND LEAVE US" - PSALM 124

Psalm 134 (ESV)

1 If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—

let Israel now say—

2 if it had not been the LORD who was on our side

when people rose up against us,

3 then they would have swallowed us up alive,

when their anger was kindled against us;

4 then the flood would have swept us away,

the torrent would have gone over us;

5 then over us would have gone

the raging waters.

6 Blessed be the LORD,

who has not given us

as prey to their teeth!

7 We have escaped like a bird

from the snare of the fowlers;

the snare is broken,

and we have escaped!

8 Our help is in the name of the LORD,

who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 124 is a song of hazard and of help. Among the Songs of Ascents, this is the one that better describes the hazardous work of all discipleship and declares the help that is always experienced at the hand of God.

A Clerk in the Complaints Department of Humanity:

The first lines of the psalm twice describes God as “for us.” The last line is “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” God is for us. God is our help.

The proper work for a Christian is witness, not apology, and Psalm 124 is an excellent model. It does not argue God’s help; it does not explain God’s help; it is a testimony of God’s help in the form of a song. The witness becomes vivid and contagious. God’s help is not a private experience; it is a corporate reality—not an exception that occurs among isolated strangers, but the norm among the people of God.

There is no other literature in all the world that is more true to life and more honest than the Psalms, for here we have warts-and-all religion. Psalm 124 is not a selected witness, inserted like a commercial into our lives to testify that life goes better with God. The people who know this psalm best and who have tested it out and used it often tell us that it is credible, that it fits into what we know of life lived in faith.

Hazardous Work:

Christian discipleship is hazardous work. There are no easy tasks on the Christian way; there are only task that can be done faithfully or erratically, with joy or with resentment. Throughout your work you need to remember that God will accomplish his will, and you get to cheerfully persist in living in the hope that nothing will separate you from God’s love in Christ Jesus.

The psalm, though, is not about hazards but about help. The hazardous work of discipleship is not the subject of the psalm but only its setting. The subject is help. During this time God wants us to not be fussy. To not become moralist who cluck their tongues over a world going to hell; Christians are people who praise the God who is on our side.

Enlarged Photographs of Ordinary Objects:

The final sentence, “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth,” links the God who created heaven and earth to the God who helps us personally.

Psalm 124 is a magnification of the items of life that are thought to be unpleasant, best kept under cover, best surrounded with silence lest they clutter our lives with unpleasantness. Psalm 124 is an instance of a person who digs deeply into the trouble and finds there the presence of the God who is on our side. Our faith develops out of the most difficult aspects of our existence, not the easiest.

The assumption by outsiders that Christians are naïve or protected is the opposite of the truth: Christians know more about the deep struggles of life than others, more about the ugliness of sin. This psalm looks into the troubles of history, the anxiety of personal conflict and emotional trauma. And it sees there the God who is on our side, God is our help.

We speak our words of praise in a world that is hellish; we sing our songs of victory in a world where things get messy; we live our joy among people who neither understand nor encourage us. But the content of our lives is God, not humanity. We are not scavenging in the dark alleys of the world, poking in its garbage cans for a bare subsistence. We are traveling in the light, toward God who is rich in mercy and strong to save. It is Christ, not culture, who defines our lives. It is the help we experience, not the hazards we risk, that shape our days.

If the LORD was not on our side we would have been swallowed alive. But our help is in the name of The LORD, the one who made heaven and earth.

7: SECURITY: “GOD ENCIRCLES HIS PEOPLE” - PSALM 125

Psalm 125 (ESV)

1Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

2As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his people,
from this time forth and forevermore.

3For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest
on the land allotted to the righteous,
lest the righteous stretch out
their hands to do wrong.

4 Do good, O LORD, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts!

5But those who turn aside to their crooked ways
the LORD will lead away with evildoers!
Peace be upon Israel!

Backslider was a basic word in the religious vocabulary depicting people who had made a commitment of faith to our Lord, had been active in church, but had lost their footing on the ascents to Christ and backslid. This was a threat to all, at all times. You could at any moment fall victim to losing your footing and slipping backwards. Another way to look at this action Christians are prone to is by examining scripture and seeking a different truth. In scripture there is a background of confidence, a leisured security, among people of faith.

Someone Else Built the Fortress:

The emphasis of Psalm 125 is not the precariousness of the Christian life but on its solidity. Jerusalem was set in a saucer of hills. It was the safest of cities because of the protective fortress these hills provided. Just so, is the person of faith surrounded by the Lord.

People of faith have the same needs for protection and security as anyone else. What is different is that we don't have to build our own. God provides our safe haven. He constructs the walls that secure us in his presence. At no time does a person of faith feel left out in the wilderness, but brought within the city gates to rest in the peace and shelter that God provides in Christ in the Gospel.

A Saw-Toothed History:

The confident, robust faith that we desire and think is our destiny is qualified by recurrent insecurities. Singing psalm 125 is one way Christians have to develop confidence and banish insecurity. One threat to our security comes from feelings of depression and doubt. We can be moved by nearly anything: sadness, joy, success, failure.

Israel can be described as a having a saw-toothed-history. One day it's up, and next it is down. But as we read about their history we realize something steady: they are always God's people. We learn to live not by our feelings about God but by the facts of God. Our security should come from who God is, not from how we feel about him. Discipleship is a decision to live by what we know about God, not by what we feel. In other words, it's not what we feel about God that makes us secure, its that God chooses to know us and Christ chooses to save us.

A Damoclean Sword:

Another source of uncertainty is our pain and suffering. The daily conflicts that we face can be demoralizing. God tells us that danger and oppression are never too much for faith. That

nothing counter to God's justice has eternity to it. God will never let you down; he'll never push you past your limits; he'll always help you come through it.

A Nonnegotiable Contract:

The third kind of threat to the confidence promised to the Christian is the fear of defection. However, once you are a Christian there is no getting out of it. We have our ups and downs, zealously believing one day and gloomily doubting the next, but God is faithful. You may choose the crooked way. You may choose to run from God. But if you are His, He will not lose you. If He has begun a good work He will bring it completion. Our confidence, our security, our perseverance is not due to our performance, our faithfulness, or our determination but to the LORD who surrounds His people, to the Spirit who seals His people, to the Shepherd who leads His people.

Mountain Climbers Roped Together:

Psalm 125 says that being a Christian is like sitting in the middle of Jerusalem, fortified and secure. Neither our feelings nor the facts of suffering nor the fear of defection are evidence that God has abandoned us. Do not be anxious, our life with God is a sure thing, because He is sure and because He surrounds and because He saves and because He seeks.

Traveling the way of faith and climbing the ascent to Christ may be difficult, but it is not worrisome. The weather may be adverse, but it is never fatal. We may slip and stumble and fall, but the rope will hold us. God will always hold us.

8: JOY: “WE LAUGHED, WE SANG” - PSALM 126

Psalm 126 (ESV)

1When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

2Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

3The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad.

4Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negeb!

5 Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!

6He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.

One of the delightful discoveries along the way of Christian discipleship is how much enjoyment there is, how much laughter you hear, how much sheer fun you find. As Christians we should partake in joy as a daily ritual, exclaiming our enjoyment in living a life of obedience to God.

A Consequence, Not a Requirement:

Joy is characteristic of the Christian pilgrimage. It is the second in Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22 - 23). It is the first of Jesus' signs in the Gospel of John. Joy is not a requirement of Christian discipleship, it is a consequence. It is not what we have to acquire in order to experience life in Christ; it is what comes to us when we are walking in the way of faith and obedience. We can decide to live in response to the abundance of God and not under the dictatorship of our own poor needs. One of the certain consequences of such a life is joy, the kind expressed in Psalm 126.

Joyful Expectation:

Joy is nurtured by anticipation. If the joy-producing acts of God are characteristic of our past as God's people, they will also be characteristic of our future as his people. Christian joy is not an escape from sorrow. Pain and hardship still come, but they are unable to drive out the happiness that the redeemed will experience. Joy is what God gives, not what we work up.

Christian joy happens in the midst of pain, suffering, loneliness, and misfortune. "3More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. 6For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. 11More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" (Rom 5:3-11).

The psalm does not give joy as a package or as a formula, but there are some things it does do. It shows up the tininess of the world's joy and affirms the solidarity of God's joy. God promises that whatever else is happening we can be a happy people. Why? Because "the LORD has done great things for us; we are glad."

9: WORK: "IF GOD DOESN'T BUILD THE HOUSE" - PSALM 127

Psalm 127 (ESV)

1Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchman stays awake in vain.

2It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives to his beloved sleep.

3Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.

4Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the children of one's youth.

5Blessed is the man
who fills his quiver with them!

He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

One of the tasks of Christian discipleship is to relearn how to work. One requirement of discipleship is to learn the ways sin skews our nature and to submit what we learn to the continuing will of God, so that we are reshaped through the days of our obedience. Psalm 127 show both the right way and he wrong way to work. It posts a warning and provides an example to guide Christians in work that is done to the glory of God.

Babel or Buddhist:

Psalm 127 first posts a warning about work. If we work without God then we are wasting our time. Anything we try and accomplish on our own, without his blessing, will never glorify him. Psalm 127 shows a way to work that is neither sheer activity nor pure passivity. It doesn't glorify work as such, and it doesn't condemn work as such. If we want to experience the fullness of work we need to work for what God wants.

In the Beginning God Worked:

The Bible begins with an announcement that God created. He did something, he created something, he worked. The work of God is defined in the Scriptures. One of the reasons that Christians read Scripture repeatedly and carefully is to find out just how God works in Jesus Christ so that we can first rest in the work of Jesus Christ (The Gospel) and then work in the name of Jesus Christ.

In every letter that the apostle Paul wrote, he demonstrated that a Christian's work is a natural, inevitable and faithful development out of God's work. Christian discipleship, by orienting us in God's work and setting us in the mainstream of what God is already doing, frees us from the compulsiveness of work. Every Christian must be constantly vigilant against believing that they can do God's work for him.

The foundational truth is that work is good. If God does it, it must be all right. Work has dignity: there can be nothing degrading about work if God works. Work had purpose: there can be nothing futile about work if God works.

Effortless Work:

In contrast to the anxious labor that builds cities and guards possessions, this Psalm praises the effortless work of making children. We do not make these people that walk among us, we

participate in an act of love that was provided for us in the structure of God's creation. By joining Jesus and the Psalm we learn a way of work that does not acquire things or amass possessions but responds to God and develops relationships. The work that we are called to do is the personal relationships that we create and develop. Out of numerous handshakes and greetings, some germinate and grow into a friendship in Christ.

Relentless compulsive work habits which our society rewards and admires are seen by the psalmist as a sign of weak faith and assertive pride, as if God could not be trusted to accomplish his will, as if we could rearrange the universe by our own effort. Psalm 127 insists on a perspective in which our effort is at the periphery and God's work is at the center.

10: HAPPINESS: “ENJOY THE BLESSING! REVEL IN THE GOODNESS” - PSALM 128

Psalm 128 (ESV)

1 Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!

2 You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;
you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.

3 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.

4 Behold, thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.

5 The LORD bless you from Zion!
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life!

6 May you see your children’s children!
Peace be upon Israel!

Being a Christian is what we were created for. The life of faith has the support of an entire creation and the resources of a magnificent redemption.

Promises and Pronouncements:

Blessing is the word that describes this happy state of affairs. Psalm 128, sandwiched between promises and pronouncements, is an illustration of blessing. An image of a life that is bounded

on one side by promises of blessing, on the other side by pronouncements of blessing, and experiences blessings between those boundaries.

Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, identifies the eight key qualities in the life of a person of faith and announces each one with the word blessed. Jesus makes it clear that discipleship is an expansion of our capacities, an overflowing of joy, and a blessed life.

Sharing In Life:

Blessing has inherent in it the power to increase. It functions by sharing and delight in life. We must develop better and deeper concepts of happiness than those held by the world, which makes a happy life to consist in “ease, honors, and great wealth.” Psalm 128 helps us do that. Too much of the world’s happiness depends on taking from one to satisfy the other. As we learn to give and share, our vitality increases, and the people around us become fruitful vines and olive shoots at our tables. For the Christian, blessing comes so that we can bless. Being blessed results in blessing others.

Traveling by the Roads:

To guard against all blasphemous chumminess with the Almighty, the Bible talks of the fear of the Lord—not to scare us but to bring us to awesome attention before the overwhelming grandeur of God. Not only do we let God be God as he really is, but we start doing the things for which he made us.

People accuse religion with interfering with what they consider their innocent pleasures and wishes. But religion is an inconvenience only to those who are traveling against the grain of creation, at cross-purposes with the way that leads to redemption. God’s way, and God’s presence are where we experience happiness that lasts, to our children’s children.

11: PERSEVERANCE: “THEY NEVER COULD KEEP ME DOWN” - PSALM 129

Psalm 129 (ESV)

1 “Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth”—

let Israel now say—

2 “Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth,

yet they have not prevailed against me.

3 The plowers plowed upon my back;

they made long their furrows.”

4 The LORD is righteous;

he has cut the cords of the wicked.

5 May all who hate Zion

be put to shame and turned backward!

6 Let them be like the grass on the housetops,

which withers before it grows up,

7 with which the reaper does not fill his hand

nor the binder of sheaves his arms,

8 nor do those who pass by say,

“The blessing of the LORD be upon you!

We bless you in the name of the LORD!”

Tough Faith:

The people of God are tough. For long centuries those who belong to the world have waged war against the way of faith, and they have yet to win. Christian faith needs to be as tough as a perennial that can stick it out through storm and drought, survive the trampling of careless feet and the attacks of vandals. The person of true faith outlasts all the oppressors. Faith lasts.

Jesus' ministry began with forty days of temptation and concluded with his crucifixion. There were cunning attempts to get him off track, every temptation disguised as a suggestion for improvement, offered with the best of intentions to help Jesus in the ministry on which he had so naively and innocently set out. The way of Jesus' faith is the way our faith should be. It is not a fad that is taken up in one century only to be discarded in the next. It is a way that works. It has been tested thoroughly.

Cut Cords, Withered Grass:

The life of the world that is opposed or indifferent to God is barren and futile. It is naively thinking you might get a harvest of grain from that shallow patch of dirt on a shelf of rock. The way of the world is marked by proud, God-defying purposes, unharnessed from eternity and therefore worthless and futile. As this Psalm points out the world's way results in withered grass which comes to nothing at the harvest.

The Passion of Patience:

For who does not experience flashes of anger at those who make our way hard and difficult? There are times in the long obedience of Christian discipleship when we get tired and fatigue draws our tempers short. In this time we look to God to give us patience and fill us with love. We all make mistakes in this walk, just as the psalmist did in Psalm 129, but perseverance does not mean perfection. It means that we keep on going right through all the people that make our way more treacherous. We will not learn by swallowing our sense of outrage, or excusing all wickedness as a neurosis. We will do it by offering up our anger to God, who trains us in creative love.

God Sticks with Us:

The cornerstone sentence of Psalm 129 is “The LORD is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked.” The emphasis is on his dependable personal relationship. He is always there for us. That he fights for us is the reason Christians can look back over a long life crisscrossed with cruelties, unannounced tragedies, unexpected setbacks, sufferings, disappointments, depressions, and see it all as a road of blessings. The central reality for Christians is the personal, unalterable, persevering commitment God makes to us. Perseverance is not the result of our determination, it is the result of God’s faithfulness. Christian discipleship is a process of paying more and more attention to God’s righteousness and less and less attention to our own.

Purposes Last:

The Christian faith is the discovery of the God who sticks with us, the righteous God. Christian discipleship is a responsive decision to walk in his ways, steadily and firmly, and then finding that His way integrates all our interests, passions and gifts, our human needs and our eternal aspirations. It is the way of life we were created for. It is the way of life that does not end in a weak and withered harvest but one blessed by the righteous LORD.

12: HOPE: "I PRAY TO GOD...AND WAIT FOR WHAT HE'LL SAY & DO" - PSALM 130

Psalm 130 (ESV)

1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

2 O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

O Lord, who could stand?

4 But with you there is forgiveness,

that you may be feared.

5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

6 my soul waits for the Lord

more than watchmen for the morning,

more than watchmen for the morning.

7 O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with him is plentiful redemption.

8 And he will redeem Israel

from all his iniquities.

To be human is to be in trouble. Man and woman, alone in creation, suffer. For suffering is pain plus: physical or emotional pain plus the awareness that our own worth as people is threatened, that our own value as creatures made in the dignity of God is called into question,

that our own destiny as eternal souls is jeopardized. A Christian is a person who decides to face and live through suffering. Psalm 130 grapples mightily with suffering, sings its way through it, and provides usable experience for those who are committed to traveling the way of faith to God through Jesus Christ.

Giving Dignity to Suffering:

By setting the anguish out in the open and voicing it as a prayer, the psalm gives a dignity to our suffering. We should set suffering squarely, openly, and passionately before God. The Gospels offer this view of suffering: in suffering we enter the depths; we are at the heart of things; we are near to where Christ was on the cross. Psalm 130 focuses on immersing suffering in God as all the suffering is spoken in the form of prayer, which means that God is taken seriously as a personal and concerned Father.

Employed to Wait:

Such are the two great realities of Psalm 130: suffering is real; God is real. We will cry from the depths and our cry will be heard. Suffering is a mark of our existential authenticity; God is proof of our essential and eternal humanity. We are to wait and watch, and through this will find hope. This means going about our assigned task of suffering with the knowledge that God will provide the meaning and the conclusions.

An Eye Specialist and a Painter:

When we suffer we attract counselors as money attracts thieves. Everybody has an idea of what we did wrong to get into this situation and also how to get out. But what we truly need is hope; hope from God. We need to know that suffering is part of what it means to be human and not something alien. We need to know where we are and where God is. We need to know that God understand and cares about our suffering.

Psalm 130 is essential equipment, for it convinces us that the big difference is not in what people suffer but in the way they suffer. This psalm is a powerful demonstration that our place in the depths is not out of bounds from God. This Psalm shows us that our hope comes not from our holiness, our performance, or our abilities, but is grounded in God's steadfast love, in His plentiful redemption, in His sanctifying work. Cry out from your depths. Cry out to the LORD who hears. Cry out knowing He hears not because you are sinless but because He forgives. Cry out and wait for His redemption not for worldly council. Cry out and wait in hope "For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities."

13: HUMILITY: "I'VE KEPT MY FEET ON THE GROUND" - PSALM 131

Psalm 131 (ESV)

1O LORD, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
2But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

3 O Israel, hope in the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore.

Humility is the obverse side of God, whereas pride is the obverse side of confidence in self. (John Baillie)

Psalm 131 is a maintenance psalm. It gets rid of that which looks good to those who don't know any better, and reduces the distance between our hearts and their roots in God. The two things that Psalm 131 prunes away are unruly ambition and infantile dependency.

Aspiration Gone Crazy:

All cultures throw certain stumbling blocks in the way of those who pursue gospel realities. The way of faith deals with these realities whenever and in every culture. One stumbling block that has become prevalent is ambition. Our culture encourages and rewards ambition without qualification. To be on top, no matter what your on top of, is admired. It is hard to recognize

pride as a sin when it is held up on every side as a virtue, urged as profitable and rewarded as an achievement.

We are caught up in a way of life that, instead of delighting in finding out the meaning of God and searching out the conditions in which human qualities can best be realized, recklessly seeks ways to circumvent nature, arrogantly defies personal relationships and names God only in curses. Those who yield themselves up to the influence of ambition will soon lose themselves in a labyrinth of perplexity.

As Content as a Child:

Having realized the dangers of pride, the sin of thinking too much of ourselves, we are suddenly in danger of another mistake, thinking too little of ourselves. There are some that believe since the great Christian temptation is to be everything, the perfect solution is to be nothing. These people then compensate for their lives by weepily clinging to God. But Christian faith is not neurotic dependency but childlike trust. We do not cling to God desperately out of fear and the panic of insecurity; we come to him freely in faith and love. Our Lord gave us the picture of a child as a model for Christian faith, not because of the child's helplessness, but because of the child's willingness to be led, to be taught, to be blessed. For God does not want us neurotically dependent on him but willingly trustful in him.

The Plain Way:

We are always, it seems, reeling from one side of the road to the other as we travel in the way of faith. We are first incited into being grandiose and then intimidated into being infantile. But there is another way, the plain way of quiet Christian humility. As we learn this Psalm we discover the quietness of the weaned child, the tranquility of maturing trust. Psalm 131 nurtures: a quality of calm confidence and quiet strength that knows the difference between unruly arrogance and faithful aspiration. This song teaches us not to seek our glory but to be

about God's glory as the one we trust, the one we love to be with, and the one we hope in from this time forth and forevermore.

14: OBEDIENCE: "HOW HE PROMISED GOD" - PSALM 132

Psalm 132 (ESV)

1 Remember, O LORD, in David's favor,
all the hardships he endured,

2 how he swore to the LORD
and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob,

3 "I will not enter my house
or get into my bed,

4 I will not give sleep to my eyes
or slumber to my eyelids,

5 until I find a place for the LORD,
a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob."

6 Behold, we heard of it in Ephrathah;
we found it in the fields of Jaar.

7 "Let us go to his dwelling place;
let us worship at his footstool!"

8 Arise, O LORD, and go to your resting place,
you and the ark of your might.

9 Let your priests be clothed with righteousness,
and let your saints shout for joy.

10 For the sake of your servant David,
do not turn away the face of your anointed one.

11 The LORD swore to David a sure oath
from which he will not turn back:

"One of the sons of your body

I will set on your throne.
12 If your sons keep my covenant
and my testimonies that I shall teach them,
their sons also forever
shall sit on your throne.”

13 For the LORD has chosen Zion;
he has desired it for his dwelling place:

14 “This is my resting place forever;
here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

15 I will abundantly bless her provisions;
I will satisfy her poor with bread.

16 Her priests I will clothe with salvation,
and her saints will shout for joy.

17 There I will make a horn to sprout for David;
I have prepared a lamp for my anointed.

18 His enemies I will clothe with shame,
but on him his crown will shine.”

True knowledge of God is born out of obedience. (John Calvin)

Stable, Not Petrified:

We want Christian faith that has stability but is not petrified, that has vision but is not hallucinatory. Psalm 132 is a psalm of David’s obedience. The psalm shows obedience as a lively, adventurous response of faith that is rooted in historical fact and reaches into a promised hope.

Obedience with a History:

The first half of Psalm 132 is the part that roots obedience in fact and keeps our feet on the ground. There is a vast, rich reality of obedience beneath the feet of disciples; and if we are going to live as the people of God, we need more data than our own experiences to draw from. Biblical history is a good memory for what does and does not work. Psalm 132 activates faith's memory so that obedience will be grounded.

Hope: A Race Towards God's Promises:

Psalm 132 doesn't just keep our feet on the ground, it also gets them off the ground. For obedience is not a stodgy plodding in the ruts of religion, it is a hopeful race toward God's promises. Obedience is fulfilled by hope. Psalm 132 cultivates a hope that gives wings to obedience, a hope that is consistent with the reality of what God has done in the past but is not confined to it. All the expectations listed in Psalm 132 have their origin in an accurately remembered past. Christians who master Psalm 132 will be protected from the danger that we should reduce Christian existence to ritually obeying a few commandments that are congenial to our temperament and convenient to our standard of living. It gives us, instead, a vision into the future so that we can see what is right before us. Obedience is doing what God tells us to do in it.

The Strength to Stand, the Willingness to Leap:

In such ways Psalm 132 cultivates the memory and nurtures the hope that lead to mature obedience. For Christian living demands that we keep our feet on the ground; it also asks us to make a leap of faith. What we require is obedience—the strength to stand and the willingness to leap, and the sense to know when to do which. Which is exactly what we get when an accurate memory of God's ways is combined with a lively hope in His promises.

**15: COMMUNITY: "LIKE COSTLY ANOINTING OIL FLOWING DOWN HEAD & BEARD" - PSALM
133**

Psalm 133 (ESV)

1 Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!
2 It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!
3 It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the LORD has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.

Our membership in the church is a corollary of our faith in Christ. We can no more be a Christian and have nothing to do with the church than we can be a person and not be in a family. When we become Christians, we are among brothers and sisters in faith. No Christian is an only child.

Not Like Paying Taxes:

This Psalm puts into song what is said and demonstrated throughout Scripture: community is essential. God never works with individuals in isolation for isolation, but always with people in community. How great it is to have everyone sharing a common purpose, traveling a common path, striving toward a common goal, that path and purpose and goal being God.

Two Ways to Avoid Community:

Living together in a way that evokes the glad song of Psalm 133 is one of the great and arduous tasks before Christ's people. Nothing is more difficult. A common way to avoid community is to deal with people as problems to be solved rather than see them as brothers and sisters to serve. Christians, rightfully understood, are a community of people who are visibly together at worship but who also remain in relationship through the week in witness and service. Another common way to avoid community is to turn the church into an institution. In this way people are treated not on the basis of personal relationships but in terms of impersonal functions.

Every community of Christians is imperiled when either routes are pursued: the route of defining people as problems to be solved, the way one might repair an automobile or the route of lumping people together in terms of economic ability or institutional effectiveness, the way one might run a bank. Somewhere else lies community—a place where each person is taken seriously, learns to trust others, depend on others, be compassionate with others, rejoices with others.

Each Other's Priest:

The first image of this Psalm is one of anointing with costly oil. The oil was being used symbolically to represent marking a person as a priest. Living together means seeing my brother and sister as my priest. When we see the other as God's anointed, our relationships are profoundly affected. It is not what a Christian is in themselves, their spirituality and piety, which constitutes the basis of our community. What determines our brotherhood is what a man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ had done to us and what Christ makes us.

The second image of this Psalm is the dew on Mount Hermon flowing down the slopes of Zion. Symbolic of the renewing spirit that God provides us. Important in any community of faith is an ever-renewed expectation of what God is doing with our brothers and sisters in the faith. When

we are in community with those Christ loves and redeems, we are constantly finding out new things about them. They are new persons each morning, endless in their possibilities, renewed by the love of Christ.

The oil communicates warm, priestly relationship. The dew communicates fresh and expectant newness.

Rousing Good Fellowship:

Christians are always attempting and never quite succeed at getting a picture of the life everlasting. Psalm 133 throws out just a hint of heaven. It is where relationships are warm and expectancies fresh, we are already beginning to enjoy the life together that will be completed in our life everlasting.

16: BLESSING: “LIFT YOUR PRAISING HANDS” - PSALM 134

Psalm 134 (ESV)

1 Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD,
who stand by night in the house of the LORD!

2 Lift up your hands to the holy place
and bless the LORD!

3 May the LORD bless you from Zion,
he who made heaven and earth!

Stand, Stoop, Stay:

The way of discipleship begins in an act of repentance and concludes in a life of praise. God enters into a covenant with us, he pours out his own life for us, he shares the goodness of his Spirit, the vitality of his creation, the joys of his redemption. That is blessing.

The God who stands, stoops, and stays summarizes the posture of blessing: God stands—he is foundational and dependable; God stoops—he kneels to our level and meets us where we are; God stays—he sticks with us through hard times and good, sharing his life with us in grace and peace.

An Invitation and a Command:

Psalm 134 features the word blessing in a form that might be called an invitation and a command. Bless God. Do that for which you were created and redeemed; lift your voices in gratitude; enter into the community of praise and prayer that anticipates the final consummation of faith in heaven. Bless The Lord.

Feelings Don't Run the Show:

Lift your arms in blessing and just maybe your heart will get the message and be lifted up also in praise. Find the right things to do, practice the actions, and other things will follow. By changing our behavior we can change our feelings. This creates an atmosphere where feelings don't run the show. There is a reality deeper than feelings. Bless The Lord.

Taking God seriously but Not Ourselves:

Never take yourself seriously and always take God seriously, and therefore, you will be full of cheerfulness, and exuberant with blessing. Blessing is at the end of this road. And that which is at the end of the road influences everything that takes place along the road. A joyful end requires a joyful means. Bless the Lord.

The Chief End:

If you do not convey joy in your demeanor and gesture and speech, you will not be an authentic witness for Jesus Christ. Delight in what God is doing, is essential in our work. The main thing is not work for the Lord; it is not suffering in the name of the Lord; it is not witnessing for the Lord; it is not teaching Sunday school for the Lord; it is not being responsible for the sake of the Lord in the community; it is not keeping the Ten Commandments; not loving your neighbor; not observing the golden rule. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. This is the destination of our ascent as Christians; God's glory in our enjoyment of God. Bless the Lord.