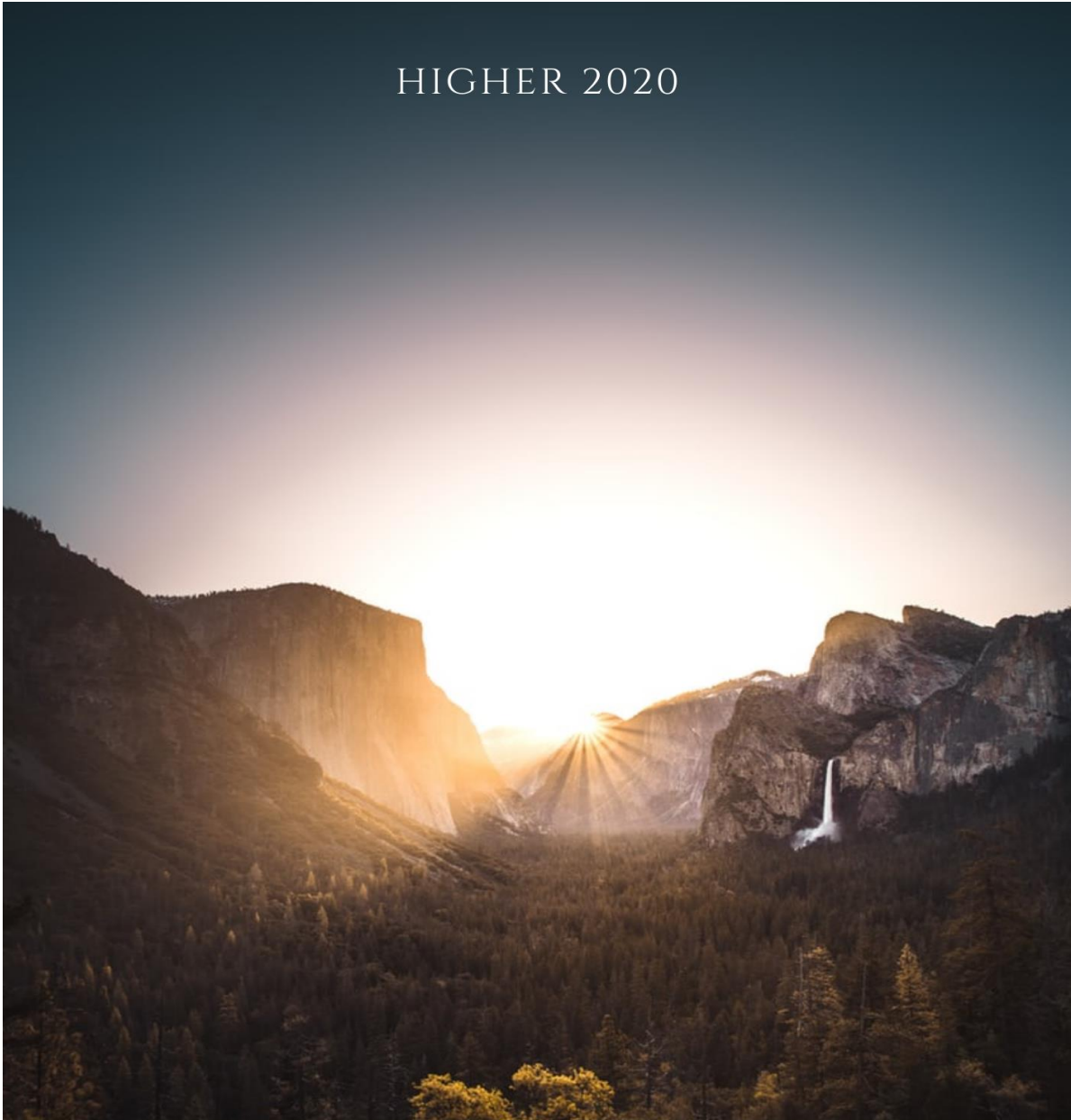


HIGHER 2020



SOUL JOURNAL

The Songs of Ascents Psalm 120 to 134

TRINITY METHODIST CHURCH

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[Titles adapted from Eugene Peterson's "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction"]

FOREWORD

Philippians 4:8 (ESV) – *“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”*

Over the years, I have been fascinated by how the great and mighty God, would descend to the level of mortals, to be among us, to be known by us. It is just as intriguing that mortals would be so caught up with the concerns of mortal life that we pass up on this opportunity. It is no wonder then that mortals continue to wallow in the lowly affairs of life and miss the Higher life that God is calling us towards.

I have a feeling that many of life’s challenges can be given a refreshing and invigorating perspective if only we set our sights Higher. There is a great impetus for setting us our sights Higher. God can be found when we look Higher. Higher is where God is. And God is calling us to set our sights Higher. TMC’s theme for the year is Higher. We must rise up from where we are to get to know this God.

The Songs of Ascents (Psalm 120-134) record for us the spiritual experience of the Jewish pilgrims as they made their journey or “ascent” to Jerusalem to worship God. They climbed Higher in search of God. They rose up to be in the heavenly places to know God for who He truly is.

We are also on a journey. A faith journey.

This “Soul Journal” has been crafted to help us on this journey.

Journalling about our faith journey nurtures our soul. “Soul Journal” is also a play on the word sojourner, which describes what

the Jewish pilgrims were, and which also describes what we are in our faith journey.

This “Soul Journal” aims to help you spend quality time with the Lord, reflecting on the Songs of Ascents. There are 15 Songs of Ascent, of which 9 will be covered in the sermon series. Hence, it is really up to you how long you would like to spend to ponder on each of the 15 Songs of Ascent covered in this journal.

Our hope is that through reading Scripture, making Spirit-led observations, learning how to apply the Word appropriately, and cultivating a prayerful life, we will experience the blessings of journeying (or sojourning) with God as we seek to go higher in our understanding of and living for Him.

May the Lord bless your faith journey with Him, and may He take you Higher in your relationship with Him!

Blessings in Christ!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alvin Chan', written in a cursive style.

Rev Alvin Chan
Pastor-in-charge
Trinity Methodist Church

HOW TO USE YOUR SOUL JOURNAL

Step 1: Set aside the demands pulling you in all directions, and all your electronic distractions. Be still and know that He is God.

Think of the acronym S.O.A.P

Step 2: S = Scripture

As you read the Scripture text, ask the Lord to give you His wisdom to understand what the text is saying, and bring home to your heart what He's saying to you through the text.

Step 3: O = Observation

Observe carefully what the Scripture is saying. Think about whom the text was originally addressed to, and why it was written. You will find some brief context provided for each psalm, as well as at least 1 observation question to help you here. Don't feel restricted by the question though!

Ponder the text's meaning and purpose. Take several moments to meditate on it, allowing it to soak within your mind, heart and soul.

Step 4: A = Application

After you've carefully observed what the text says, take some time to write out how you plan to put into practice what the Lord has revealed to you through the text. You will also find some reflection questions to help you here. Basically, how will you be different today as a result of what you've just read?

Step 5: P = Prayer

Finish your time in the Word with a thoughtful prayer to God. Ask Him to help you apply what you've just learnt. Express your thanksgiving to Him. Consider who the Lord may be leading you to pray for, because of your time in the Word.

Feel free to use your Soul Journal to take sermon notes as well.

(Some points adapted from Wayne Cordeiro's "The Divine Mentor")

Remember

This Soul Journal is intended to serve you in your growth and journey with Christ. You can be flexible in how you use it, but be sure to develop a healthy habit of spending time daily with the Lord.

Some have asked, "when is the best time for my devotions? Morning or evening?"

The answer would be "The best time is when you are at your best!" If you are a morning person, do your devotions in the morning. If you are an evening person, do your devotions in the evening.

The bottom line is:

Jesus deserves our best, so let's give Him the best part of our day!

Scripture

Repentance - The Lord our Deliverer - Psalm 120

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!

Psalm 120 is an individual lament by someone living away from Israel; his distress concerns the way deceitful people are stirring up war, while the psalmist prefers peace. It is possible that the psalm originated during the exile, when God told His dispersed people to seek the “welfare” of the city to which they were sent (cf. Jer.29:7) (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

What does the Psalmist do in his distress?

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

Reflect on when we have encountered distress in our lives. What was our first response?

What has God delivered you from?

What are you asking God to deliver you from?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.

Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Providence - The Lord our Keeper - Psalm 121

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? ²My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. ³He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. ⁴Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. ⁵The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. ⁶The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. ⁷The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. ⁸The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

Psalm 121 seems to be intended to instill confidence in those making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship. The successful journey becomes a parable for the whole of one's life, in which the faithful can be confident of God's care. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

How does the Lord help the Psalmist?

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

In what ways have we experienced God's providence & help in our lives?

How is the Lord calling you to respond in your life?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.

Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Worship: the Lord of Shalom and Shalvah - Psalm 122

¹I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”

²Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!

³Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together, ⁴to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. ⁵There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David. ⁶Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! “May they be secure who love you! ⁷Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!” ⁸For my brothers and companions’ sake I will say, “Peace be within you!” ⁹For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

Shalvah is translated “security” in this Psalm, and reflects the security and ease at being at home in God’s presence.

Shalom is translated “peace” in this Psalm, and reflects completeness and welfare that comes from God.

This psalm celebrates Zion as God’s chosen city, and specifically the privilege of going there on a pilgrimage. Not only is “the house of the Lord” there, but so are “the thrones of the house of David”. Christians who sing this recognise that in their gathered worship they are carrying out the task of the temple and their Davidic king, Jesus, is present with them. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

What does this Psalm show you about worship?

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

To what extent do you enjoy worshipping God?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.
Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Service: The Lord our merciful Master - Psalm 123

*¹To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
²Behold, 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. ³Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. ⁴Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.*

This is a community lament, as the references to “we” and “us” show. It envisions a situation in which the faithful pilgrims feel themselves subjected to scorn and contempt, whether from the unfaithful in Israel, or unbelieving Gentiles among whom they must pass. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

What kind of posture/attitude does the Psalmist approach God with?

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

In what way has God's mercy been real to you?

How is God calling you to respond, in light of His mercy in your life?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.
Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Help - The Lord on our side - Psalm 124

¹If it had not been the Lord who was on our side— let Israel now say— ²if it had not been the Lord who was on our side when people rose up against us, ³then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; ⁴then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; ⁵then over us would have gone the raging waters. ⁶Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth! ⁷We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped! ⁸Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

This is a thanksgiving hymn for the community, particularly for an occasion in which God's people have been under threat but have been delivered. It is possible that David wrote this psalm in response to some deliverance such as in 2 Sam.5:17-25, but the words are quite general and thus applicable in a wide variety of settings, including the journey of pilgrims to Jerusalem. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

It is possible that David wrote this Psalm in response to God's deliverance in 2 Sam.5:17-25. How does this context illumine your reflection of this psalm?

Observation (con't)

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

When have you been assured that God is on our side amidst great distress?

How is God calling you to respond in light of this?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.
Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Security - The Lord Who surrounds us - Psalm 125

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. ⁴Do 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!

This psalm instills confidence in the Lord's people, that remaining loyal to Him really is worth it. The leading image is of Zion as a city surrounded by sheltering mountains. It is possible that some of Zion's citizens might go over to evil, but the lord will see to it that He vindicates His faithful ones.

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

What promises does God give to “those who trust in the Lord”?

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

Where (or even who) do we currently find our security and safety in?

If it's not the Lord, then how can we begin to turn our trust towards Him?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.
Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Joy - The Lord our Restorer - Psalm 126

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! ⁵Those 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.

This is a community lament that recalls a previous time of God’s mercy on His people, and asks for a fresh show of that mercy. The psalm does not specify the specific situation in view, and hence can be widely applied. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

What does the change of tenses (from past ‘restored’ to present ‘restore’) tell us about the posture we can take in facing adversity?

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

How has the Lord been good to you in the past? How has the Lord delivered/helped you in the past? How can we, like the Psalmist, remember the past faithfulness of God and use it for our present prayers?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.
Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Work - The Lord Who is at Work - Psalm 127

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.

The basic theme of this wisdom psalm, attributed to Solomon, is that without the Lord's blessing, all human toil is worthless. Wisdom themes are suited to worshipful pilgrims, because in the OT, faithfulness & meaning in everyday life (the emphasis of wisdom psalms) and vitality in worship go together. Christians need the same reminders. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

What was the Psalmist referring to when he wrote 'builds the house' in v1? Is it just a physical house?

V3 & v4 mentioned 'children'. What insights does this give you regarding what 'the house' means in v1 & v2?

Observation (con't)

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

Are there houses in your life that you are building on your own strength?

How is the Lord calling you to respond to the truth that 'if the Lord does not build the house, those who build it labour in vain'?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.
Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Blessedness - The Lord Whom we should Fear - Psalm 128

*¹Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways!
²You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. ³Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. ⁴Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord. ⁵The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! ⁶May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!*

This wisdom psalm expands some of the topics in Psalm 127. Psalm 127 ended with “Blessed is the man...”, and Psalm 128 gives further description of such blessedness. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

What does it mean to ‘fear’ the Lord and ‘walk(s) in his ways’?
What ‘ways’ do you think the Psalmist is referring to?

In v3&4, the images of ‘wife’ & ‘children’ are used to symbolise blessings. How about those who are single? How will the Lord bless them?

V6 equates long life with blessing. Why do you think the Psalmist says this?

Observation (con't)

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

Am I 'fearful' of the Lord? In what practical ways will I consider in 'walking his ways' in the coming weeks?

Will you reflect on your blessings from God this week? How can you strengthen your resolve to walk in His ways in your daily life?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.
Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Perseverance - the Lord is righteous - Psalm 129

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. ³The plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their furrows.” ⁴The Lord is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked. ⁵May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward! ⁶Let them be like the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up, ⁷with which the reaper does not fill his hand nor the binder of sheaves his arms, ⁸nor do those who pass by say, “The blessing of the Lord be upon you! We bless you in the name of the Lord!”

This song is a psalm of confidence for the community, as it reflects on what God’s people have endured and how long God has sustained them. It can also be called a community thanksgiving, which celebrates God’s sustaining presence, or a community lament, asking that God continue to sustain his people against those who would harm them. As a song of ascents, it reminds the pilgrims never to take their privileges for granted. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

What did the psalmist say will happen to those who oppress Israel?

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

How has the Lord delivered you from your enemies?

How can we show confidence in the Lord when we are afflicted?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.

Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Hope - The Lord our Redeemer - Psalm 130

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! ²O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy! ³If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? ⁴But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. ⁵I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; ⁶my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. ⁷O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. ⁸And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

This is an individual lament, expressing penitence and trust in God's mercy. The penitential element aims to help worshippers see themselves as forgiven people, whose only right to enter God's presence lies in His mercy. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

What are some characteristics of God which the psalmist held on to even in times of trouble?

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

What gives us hope in our troubled times?

How willing are we to allow the Lord access to our lives to search out wicked ways?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.

Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Humility - The Lord our Confidence - Psalm 131

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

This psalm of confidence in the Lord models the ideal posture of the soul before God, “a calm and quieted soul”. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

How would you characterize David’s attitude toward himself?

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

How can you begin to demonstrate humility and honesty toward God?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.
Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Obedience - The Lord Who keeps Covenant - Psalm 132

¹Remember, O Lord, in David's favor, all the hardships he endured, ²how 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, ⁴I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, ⁵until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob." ⁶Behold, 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!" ⁸Arise, O Lord, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might. ⁹Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your saints shout for joy. ¹⁰For the sake of your servant David, do not turn away the face of your anointed one. ¹¹The 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. ¹²If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies that I shall teach them, their sons also forever shall sit on your throne." ¹³For 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. ¹⁵I will abundantly bless her provisions; I will satisfy her poor with bread. ¹⁶Her priests I will clothe with salvation, and her saints will shout for joy. ¹⁷There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed. ¹⁸His enemies I will clothe with shame, but on him his crown will shine."

The theme of this royal psalm is God's covenant with the house of David (2 Sam. 7:4-16) to establish his house for the god of the people, and eventually of the world. Most of the psalm expresses confidence in these promises and asks God to carry out His purposes. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

What has David done? Explain his desire (See 2 Samuel 7).

How is God's chosen dwelling different from David's conception (vs. 11-12)?

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

What is one area in life where I need to stop thinking my way and start thinking God's way?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.
Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Community - The Lord Who unites us - Psalm 133

¹Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!

*²It 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!*

*³It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.*

This wisdom psalm celebrates the beauty of brothers and sisters in Israel dwelling together with 2 colourful similies that describe the blessedness of Israel being true to its calling. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

How do the chosen images (v2 & 3) to describe unity illumine our understanding of unity?

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

How is God calling us to work towards unity in our family and church communities?

How is God calling us to respond?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.
Who are you led to pray for this week?

Scripture

Blessing - The Lord Who Blesses - Psalm 134

¹Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord! ²Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord! ³May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!

This final Song of Ascents is geared towards a liturgical occasion, perhaps the opening or closing of a festival (depending on the identity of the ‘servants of the Lord’). By the reading argued for here, this would suit well the close of a worship service. (Source: ESV Study Bible)

Observation - what do you observe about this psalm?

Given that this is the final Psalm in the Song of Ascents, what does it convey about the end goal of faith?

Application - How is God speaking to us through this psalm?

How is God calling you to live in light of this psalm?

Prayer

Having reflected on this Psalm, craft your prayer to the Lord.
Who are you led to pray for this week?

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