

42. Psalms 124-131

Praying Psalm 124 with Jesus



¹If GOD had not been on our side – this is Israel's song –

²if GOD had not been on our side,

when enemies attacked us,

³they would have swallowed us alive,

when their anger was kindled.

⁴The flood would have swept us away, the torrent gone over us;

⁵we would have been overwhelmed by the raging waters.

⁶Blessed be GOD,

who did not give us as a prey to their teeth.

⁷We escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler.

The snare was broken, and we escaped.

⁸We called on GOD, who came to our aid,

GOD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

This is a hymn of thanksgiving to GOD for having saved the people from extreme danger.

The psalmist has experienced ‘**GOD on his side**’ (verse 1). Jesus’ disciples came to see this even more profoundly through their experience of Jesus. So can we as we pray the psalm with him. At the Last Supper Jesus promised that after his death he would go before them into Galilee (Matthew 26:32), and his last words to them were: ‘I am with you always to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:20).

Fire (verse 3) and water (verses 4-5) are the two elements most commonly used to describe destruction.

For the image of a bird escaping from the snare of a fowler (verse 7) see Psalm 57:6 and Psalm 91:1.

Psalm 124

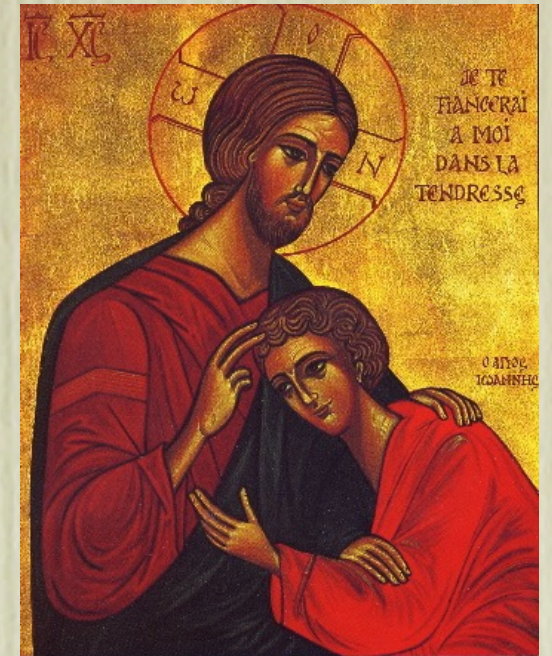
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Praying Psalm 125 with Jesus



¹Those who trust in GOD are like Mount Zion.
They stand firm for ever.

²As the mountains encircle Jerusalem,
so you, O GOD, embrace your people, now and always.

³The rule of the wicked will not rest
on the land allotted to the just,
lest the righteous turn to evil.

⁴Do good, O GOD, to those who are good, whose hearts are true.

⁵Peace be upon Israel!

Omitted

⁵*Those who turn aside to their crooked ways, may GOD send them to join the wicked.*

This is a hymn of trust (verses 1-3), leading to a prayer of petition (verses 4-5). The prayer arises out of a situation in which some Jews, including those in power (verse 3), have given up their faith under foreign influence. It may come from the period of the Maccabees. The author looks to God's justice to set things right.

The psalmist knows that God's judgment is just. He prays, therefore, that God would see to it that those who 'turn aside to their crooked ways' would suffer the judgment of the wicked (verse 5). We hear Jesus reaching out to them in love, wanting them to repent of their evildoing and find life for themselves, to the benefit of all. As Christians we join him in this prayer.

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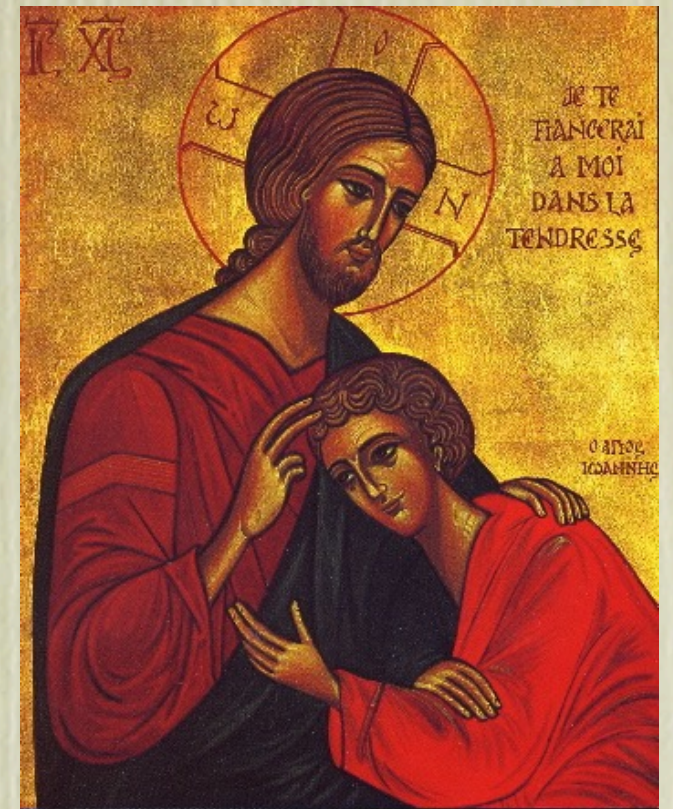
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Psalm 125



Praying Psalm 126 with Jesus



¹When GOD restored the fortunes of Zion, it seemed like a dream.

²Then was our mouth filled with laughter, on our lips there were songs.

It was said among the nations, 'What marvels GOD worked for them.'

³Indeed, GOD has done great things for us. We celebrate with joy.

⁴Restore our fortunes, O GOD, like the watercourses in the desert.

⁵May those who are sowing in tears reap with shouts of joy.

⁶They went out weeping, bearing seed for sowing.

They come back, they come back, full of song, carrying their sheaves.

This is a hymn of joy at the wonder of the return from Exile, when GOD faithfully carried out his promise to restore the fortunes of his chosen people. It was almost too good to be true (verse 1). Back home there is still much to be done. Hence the plea for a further restoration (verses 4-5), for an abundant harvest of joy.

Verses 5-6 recall an earlier psalm: 'Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the dawn' (Psalm 30:5).

Psalm 126 reminds us that the marvels God works, the great things done for the people are actually in the to-ing and fro-ing of everyday life, in the everyday ordinary yet absolutely essential sowing of seed and reaping of the harvest. This is another reminder of a God who is very much 'with us' (see the commentary on Psalm 124).

Psalm 126

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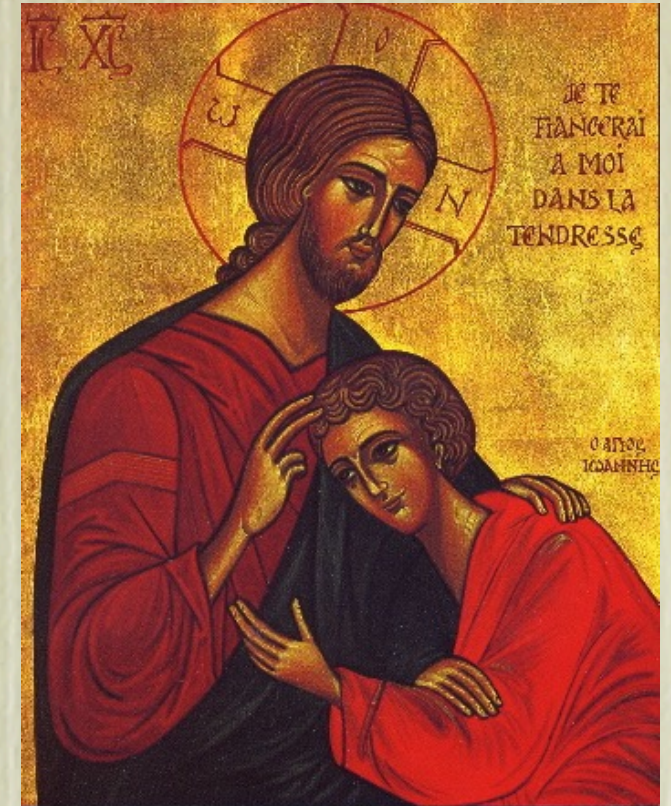
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Praying Psalm 127 with Jesus



¹If GOD does not build the house, in vain do its builders labour.
If GOD does not guard the city, in vain do the guards keep vigil.

²In vain is your earlier rising, your going later to rest,
you who toil for the bread you eat.
Those loved by GOD receive love's gifts even while they slumber.

³Children are a gift from GOD, a blessing for those who bear them.

⁴Like arrows in the hand of an archer are children born to the young.

⁵Blessed and happy are those
whose quiver is filled with these arrows.
They will have no cause for shame
when they face their foes at the gate.

The psalmist is pointing out that all our human efforts are worthless if we are not relying on GOD. Verse 2 (“Those loved by God receive love’s gifts even when they slumber”) reminds us that what ultimately matters is our communion with GOD.

³Children are a gift from GOD, a blessing for those who bear them.

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Where the translation has ‘children’ in verses 3 and 4 the Hebrew has ‘sons’. They were ignorant of the process of procreation. A tree produces a seed and the earth receives and nurtures it. They thought the male was the only source of human life, and that the role of the female was to receive and nurture this life. In light of what we now know there is no place for this cultural bias favouring the male.

Psalm 127

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in vain do its builders labour.
If GOD does not guard the city,
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Praying Psalm 128 with Jesus



This is a psalm celebrating the positive value of work and the blessing and the joy of family life, including the family of Israel centred in the mother-city, Jerusalem.

¹How good it is to revere ['fear'] GOD,
to live in accordance with God's will.

²You will eat the fruit of your labour.
In everything you will prosper.

³Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
in the heart of your home.
Your children like shoots of the olive, around your table.

⁴May this blessing be on those who revere ['fear'] GOD:

⁵'May GOD bless you from Zion. May you see Jerusalem prosper.

⁶'May you see your children's children.' On Israel, peace!

One theme expressed in this psalm is that genuine communion with God involves ethical obligations, ‘**living in accordance with God’s will**’ (verse 1). This involves ‘**labour**’ (verse 2). If we obey God’s wise will, our lives will be blessed and happy.

Another theme is that of the vine and the olive (verse 3). The vine is a symbol of the joy experienced by Israel in the love of God for his people Israel (Isaiah 32:12). The olive is a symbol of fruitful Israel (Jeremiah 11:16).

The blessing and the intimacy of which this psalm speaks invites reflection on the Church as the bride of Christ.

‘Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish’ (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Saint Cassiodorus writes of the ultimate reality of the Church: 'The gathering of all faithful saints in one soul and one heart, the bride of Christ, the Jerusalem of the life to come.'

Psalm 128 also invites us to reflect upon an ancient tradition in the Christian community which speaks of God and of Christ as our Mother. In his commentary on Psalm 101:7, 'I am made like to the pelican in the desert' (the Hebrew is Psalm 102:7, and has 'owl'), Augustine writes: 'Christ exercises fatherly authority and maternal love just as Paul is also father and mother ... through his gospel preaching.' Augustine is referring to Paul's statement to the Thessalonian community (see 1 Thessalonians 2:7-11).

Saint Anselm writes: 'You, too, good Jesus, are not you also a mother? Is not he a mother who like a hen gathers his chicks beneath his wings (Matthew 23:37)? Truly, Lord, you are a mother too' (Proslogion, line 446).

Psalms 128

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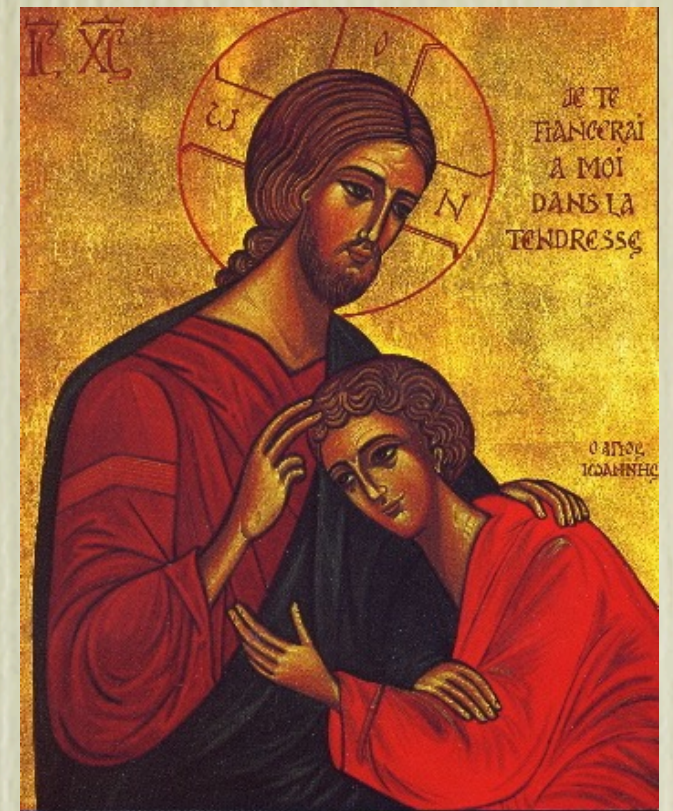
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On Israel, peace!'



Reading Psalm 129 with Jesus



Part One: The oppression suffered by the people

- ¹They attacked me from my youth – so says Israel –
- ²but they have not prevailed against me.
- ³They ploughed my back with deep furrows,
- ⁴but GOD, who is just, has broken the yoke of the wicked.

Part Two: The psalmist wants to see the oppressors punished

- ⁵May all who hate Zion be repulsed.
- ⁶Let them be like grass on the rooftop, that withers before it flowers.
- ⁷The reapers do not get to handle the grass, nor is it bound into sheaves.
- ⁸Those who pass by do not say:
‘The blessing of GOD be upon you! In GOD’s name we bless you!’

This is a prayer that those who oppose Jerusalem will be thwarted and deprived of God's blessing. The people have been treated cruelly. They have been used as slaves, yoked like farm animals, pulling the plough and turning the mill wheel.

The psalmist wants 'all who hate Zion' (verse 5) to wither (verse 6), to miss out on a harvest (verse 7) and to be deprived of a blessing (verse 8). They do not belong to the people, and so are separated from GOD.

The psalm is not found in the Christian Lectionary. It appears in the Prayer of the Church in the Prayer during the Day for Thursday Week 4. From a human point of view, the feelings are understandable, but fall short of Jesus' exhortation that we love our enemies (see Matthew 5:43-48). Reflecting on this psalm with Jesus we hear his words from the cross to those who were responsible for his being crucified: 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34).

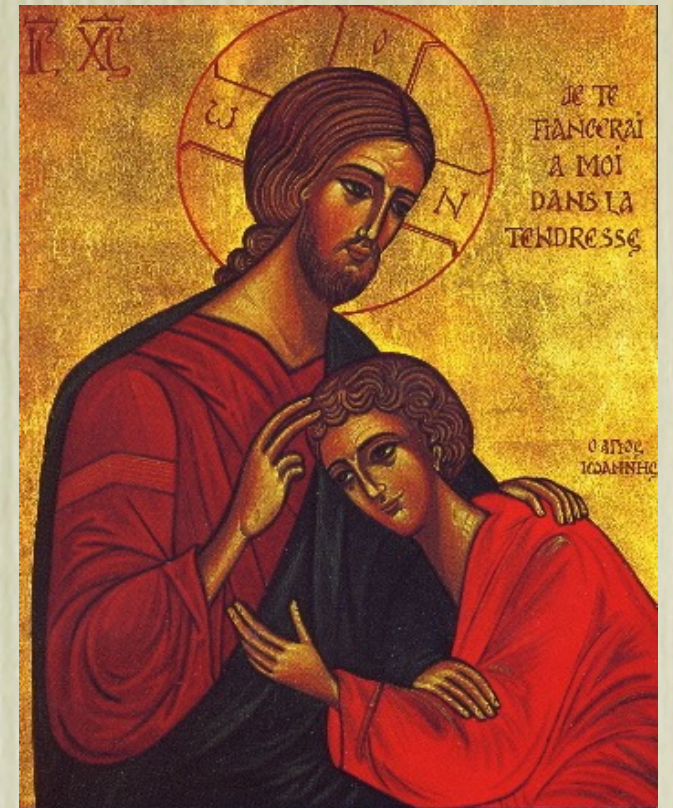
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⁸Those who pass by do not say:
‘The blessing of GOD be upon you!
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Praying Psalm 130 with Jesus



¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O GOD.

²God*, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive to my pleading!

³If you, O GOD, should mark our guilt,
who would survive?

⁴But with you there is forgiveness.
For this we revere you.

⁵I wait for you, I long for you, O GOD.
I count on your word.

⁶I am longing for you
more than watchmen for daybreak,
more than watchmen for daybreak.

Traditionally, Psalm 130 is numbered among the penitential psalms (see also Psalms 6, 12, 38, 51, 102 and 143). Though Jesus is innocent, he prays this psalm in solidarity with us sinners.

The psalmist is deeply aware of the terrible consequences of sin. Relying on God's goodness, he cries out to GOD in his distress, and calls on Israel to do the same in the certain knowledge that GOD will redeem his people. A key image is that of 'watching'. God is watching the sinner (verse 3) and the sinner is watching for God (verse 6).

‘Forgiveness’ (verse 4) is something that characterises GOD. As sinners we must approach God humbly in the hope of receiving this gracious gift. Praying this psalm with Jesus we remember that ‘He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world’ (1 John 2:2). ‘Christ gave himself a ransom for all’ (1 Timothy 2:6). ‘He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds’ (Titus 2:14).

‘By your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation’ (Revelation 5:9).

‘God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins’ (Colossians 1:14).

While waiting with expectant hope for God's mercy, however, we are not to be presumptuous: 'Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?' (Romans 2:4).

The sinner is watching eagerly for the dawning of God's mercy and the liberation this will surely bring. As Christians we think of the morning of Jesus' resurrection and we look forward to the morning of our own. For a reflection on longing (verse 5).

⁷O Israel, hope in GOD

For with GOD there is covenant love, and great power to redeem.

In verse 7 personal prayer expands out to include the whole assembly. Forgiveness is an expression of God's covenant love and an experience of liberation.

⁸Israel indeed will be redeemed from all its iniquity.

Verse 8 is the only text in the Hebrew Scriptures in which redemption extended to all sin.

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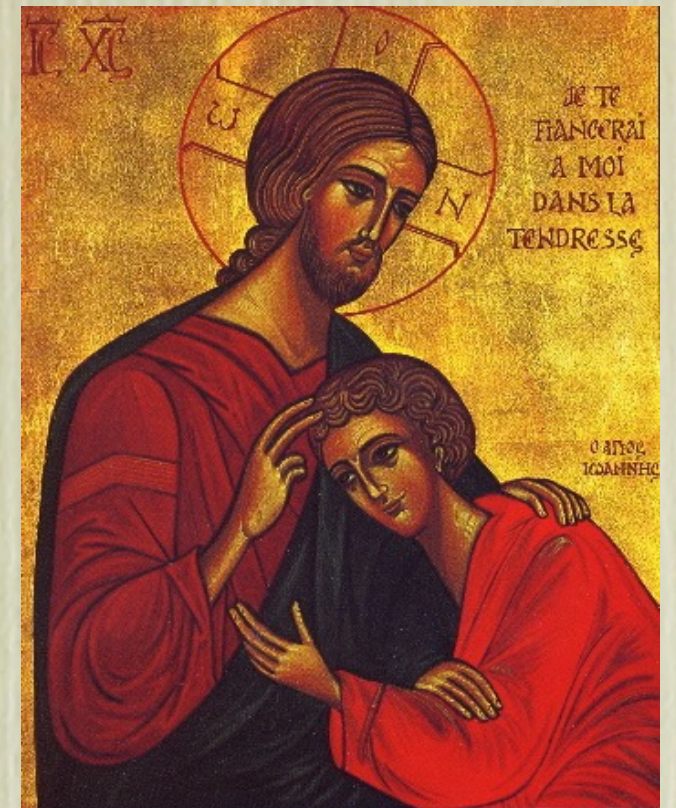
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Praying Psalm 131 with Jesus



¹O GOD, I am not proud, holding my head too high,
reaching beyond my grasp.

²I have calmed myself and stilled my longing.
I am at peace, like a weaned child
resting in its mother's arms. My whole being is at rest.

³O Israel, hope in GOD, now and forever.

The psalmist is humbly aware of his limitations and dependence on God. His confidence is not based on himself but on God's presence and care for him.

In place of 'calmed' (verse 2) the Greek Septuagint has 'humbled' – one of only two texts in the Septuagint that use the verb 'tapeinophroneô', meaning 'to think of oneself in a lowly way'. The other text is Proverbs 29:23: 'One who is lowly in spirit will obtain honour.'

In the Greek world humility was considered a vice, the equivalent of having low self-esteem. In Jesus it took on a new meaning. Jesus was happy to be dependent like a child. He delighted in calling God 'Abba!' for he knew God's unconditional love. He was content to rely on this love.

The child has been weaned, but the mother is still there for the child, who is calm, at peace, and 'resting in its mother's arms.' So the psalmist calms his desires, his irrational fears and the turmoil of his feelings, resting and placing his 'hope' in God.

By extension one can see God as a mother and the psalmist as a child being calmed by God.

‘It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took him up in my arms ... I led him with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to him like a person who lifts an infant to her cheek. I bent down to him and fed him’ (Hosea 11:3-4).

‘It was you who took me from the womb; you entrusted me safe on my mother’s breasts. Placed on your lap from my birth, since my mother bore me you have been my God’ (Psalm 22:9-10).

‘You will be suckled and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you’ (Isaiah 66:12-13).

Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall his words: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like a little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 18:3).

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