

# Psalms 120-134

## Songs of Ascent

### Introduction

In our journey through the psalms we have covered what it truly means to worship God, and many of the reasons that we worship him. We worship because he is Holy and worthy of it, we worship because he Delivers us from our sins and provides for us in the Wilderness, We worship because he keeps his promises, etc.

The psalms first and foremost create a framework for giving God the honor and praise He alone deserves. But they also serve another purpose: they are intended to be a great comfort to you.

It is in praising God that we are reminding of the great hope and peace that we have in Him. All of us are on a journey of “ascent” towards God. And while we struggle through the valleys and trials on this journey, the psalms remind us to sing and praise God anyway, remembering his steadfast love and faithfulness.

3 times a year, the Israelites journeyed back to Jerusalem. And during their pilgrimage they had an exact set of psalms they would sing to commemorate God’s faithfulness and comfort them on their journey, known as the “Psalms of Ascent.”

Today we are going to look at those psalms, see what they meant to the Israelites, see how Jesus fulfills them, and in doing so see what they can mean to us and how they can comfort us on our journey.

### The Pilgrimage Context- The 3 Feasts

According to the Law (Exodus 23:14–17; Deuteronomy 16:16), all Jewish men were required to go up to Jerusalem three times a year for the major feasts:

#### **Passover/Unleavened Bread (spring)**

Passover commemorated Israel’s deliverance from Egypt (Exodus 12). The blood of the lamb on the doorposts caused the angel of death to “pass over” them.

Unleavened Bread followed immediately, symbolizing removing sin and corruption (leaven often symbolized sin) as they left Egypt quickly.

### **Weeks/Pentecost (summer)**

Celebrated **50 days after Passover**. It was a harvest festival, offering the “firstfruits” of wheat (Lev. 23:15–21).

Jewish tradition also connected it with the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai.

It was a time to remember God’s law, and give him the firstfruits of the harvest.

### **Tabernacles/Booths (fall)**

Celebrated at the end of harvest (Lev. 23:33–43). Israelites lived in temporary booths (tents) to remember God’s provision in the wilderness and His dwelling with them.

The booths or “tabernacles (dwelling places) also represented God’s presence with his people in the Tabernacle

It was the most joyful feast, marked by water-pouring ceremonies and lights in the Temple. The water pouring reminded them of God’s provision of water in the wilderness, and the lighting of lamps symbolized God’s guiding light in the wilderness.

- **“Going Up” to Jerusalem:** No matter where one came from, Scripture describes traveling to Jerusalem as **“ascending”** because Jerusalem sat on a mountain (Mount Zion). It wasn’t only a physical climb but also a spiritual ascent toward God’s dwelling.
- **Journey Symbolism:** The pilgrimage itself was a reminder that Israel was a people called out and gathered together before God. It was a time to remember God’s past faithfulness, a time of humility and trust as they once again journey to Jerusalem, and it was a time of worship and praise

## **Christ Fulfills the feasts**

While the Israelites journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate three feasts in Remembrance of God’s works, the ultimate purpose of the feasts were to point forward to Christ

### **Passover/Unleavened Bread (spring)**

Christ is the true Passover lamb who died for our sins

1 Corinthians 5:7

*7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.*

Jesus' sinless body (without leaven) was buried. He is the Bread of Life (John 6:35), free of corruption.

John 6:35

*35 And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.*

### **Weeks/Pentecost (summer)**

Originally commemorating the giving of the law, through Christ the Holy Spirit is given at Pentecost. The Law is now written on our hearts.

Believers have the "firstfruits of the Spirit."

Romans 8:23

*23 Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.*

### **Tabernacles/Booths (fall)**

God tabernacles among us in Christ.

John 1:14 –

*"The Word became flesh and dwelt [literally 'tabernacled'] among us."*

It was during the feast of tabernacles that Jesus made two of His most important statements

- Living Water: At the water-pouring ceremony, Jesus cried out, *"If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink"* (John 7:37–39).
- Light of the World: During the lamp-lighting, He declared, *"I am the light of the world"* (John 8:12).

Future Fulfillment: Revelation 21:3–4 points to the ultimate Feast of Tabernacles when God will dwell with His people forever in the New Jerusalem.

**Jesus as the New Temple:** The ultimate pilgrimage is not to a place but to a Person. John 2:19–21 shows Jesus as the true Temple where God dwells.

**Jesus as the Way (the Ascent):** He fulfills the journey—John 14:6, "I am the way..." Just as pilgrims ascended to Zion, believers now ascend spiritually to God through Christ.

## What This Means for Us

It is important that we don't take scripture out of context, and we recognize when it is written for the Jewish people and when it is written for us.

However, because Christ fulfills the purpose of the pilgrimage, and he is now the destination of our journey, the "Psalms of Ascent" don't just apply to the Jewish pilgrimages and feasts; they apply to our own Journey in Christ.

We can now look at these 15 Psalms and see not only what they meant historically to the Israelites, but how they mirror the steps in our own Journey.

## The Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120–134)

These Psalms were likely sung in stages—on the road, as the worshippers saw the hills of Judah, entered Jerusalem, and finally arrived at the Temple.

Later Jewish tradition notes there were **15 steps leading to the inner court of the Temple**, and the Levites sang one of these psalms on each step. Whether historical or symbolic, it shows how these psalms were connected with worship in the Temple itself.

The Psalms mirror the emotional and spiritual journey of the Pilgrim as they ascend to God's holy place

### Step 1- A need for Deliverance, A Cry for Help

**Beginning in Trouble (Psalm 120):** Crying out from exile and distress.

*In my distress I cried to the Lord,*

*And He heard me.*

*<sup>2</sup>Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips*

*And from a deceitful tongue.*

**Israel Context:** The pilgrim's journey doesn't begin in Joy; it begins in despair. The Israelites were captive in Egypt for 400 years. They cried out to God, and he heard them.

**For Us:** All of us began our journey in a place of sin with a desperate need for a Savior. Your journey in Christ began when you cried out to Him.

## Step 2- Looking Unto Jesus

**Looking to the Hills (Psalm 121):** God as Protector and Keeper on the journey.

*I will lift up my eyes to the hills—*

*From whence comes my help?*

<sup>2</sup>*My help comes from the Lord,*

*Who made heaven and earth.*

<sup>3</sup>*He will not allow your foot to <sup>[a]</sup>be moved;*

*He who keeps you will not slumber.*

<sup>4</sup>*Behold, He who keeps Israel*

*Shall neither slumber nor sleep.*

<sup>5</sup>*The Lord is your <sup>[b]</sup>keeper;*

*The Lord is your shade at your right hand.*

<sup>6</sup>*The sun shall not strike you by day,*

*Nor the moon by night.*

- The term keeper means literally protector, or Shepherd
- “I lift my eyes to the hills” implies looking from a valley or a low place.
- This psalm acknowledges that our only hope and help in the valley is the Lord

**Israel Context:** an acknowledgment of God as protector and keeper

**Our Context:** we look unto Jesus as author and finisher of our faith, and as the Good Shepherd

## Step 3- Setting Sights on Jerusalem

**Jerusalem’s Peace (Psalm 122):** The joy of reaching the holy city.

*I was glad when they said to me,*

*“Let us go into the house of the Lord.”*

<sup>2</sup>*Our feet have been standing*

*Within your gates, O Jerusalem!*

<sup>6</sup>*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:*

*“May they prosper who love you.*

<sup>7</sup>*Peace be within your walls,*

*Prosperity within your palaces.”*

**Israel Context:** This psalm was a time of looking forward to God’s holy city, a prayer for peace and prosperity.

**Our Context:** We look forward to a kingdom not made with hands and pray to Jesus who is our Peace

## Step 4- Remembering God's Past Faithfulness

**Deliverance and Help (Psalms 124–126):** Remembering God's past rescues.

*"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,"  
Let Israel now say—  
<sup>2</sup>"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,  
When men rose up against us,  
<sup>3</sup>Then they would have swallowed us alive,  
When their wrath was kindled against us;  
<sup>4</sup>Then the waters would have overwhelmed us,  
The stream would have <sup>[a]</sup>gone over our soul;  
<sup>5</sup>Then the swollen waters  
Would have <sup>[b]</sup>gone over our soul."*

**Israel Context:** A powerful acknowledgement of where the Israelites would be if God had not been on their side; and the bottom of the red sea, or the Jordan river.

**Our Context:** where would you be without God?

## Step 5- Learning to Depend on Him

**Dependence on the Lord (Psalms 127–129):** Family, work, and security only come from Him.

*Unless the Lord builds the house,  
They labor in vain who build it;  
Unless the Lord guards the city,  
The watchman stays awake in vain.  
<sup>2</sup>It is vain for you to rise up early,  
To sit up late,  
To eat the bread of sorrows;  
For so He gives His beloved sleep.*

**Israel Context:** If God had not been in the rebuilding the temple, or the walls and city, the people of Israel would have labored in vain

**Our Context:** If God is not in your marriage, career, finances, home, and every aspect of life, you are working in vain.

## Step 6- Learning to Worship

### 130 Forgiveness

<sup>3</sup> If You, Lord, should <sup>[a]</sup>mark iniquities,  
O Lord, who could stand?

<sup>4</sup> But there is forgiveness with You,  
That You may be feared.

<sup>7</sup> O Israel, hope in the Lord;  
For with the Lord there is mercy,  
And with Him is abundant redemption.

<sup>8</sup> And He shall redeem Israel  
From all his iniquities.

- One of the most important things for the Israelites to acknowledge and praise for is not just God's continuous provision, but his continuous forgiveness.

## Step 7- Learning Humility

### 131 Humility and Trust in God

Lord, my heart is not <sup>[a]</sup>haughty,  
Nor my eyes <sup>[b]</sup>lofty.  
Neither do I <sup>[c]</sup>concern myself with great matters,  
Nor with things too <sup>[d]</sup>profound for me.

<sup>2</sup> Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
Like a weaned child with his mother;  
Like a weaned child is my soul within me.

<sup>3</sup> O Israel, hope in the Lord  
From this time forth and forever.

- A level of humility that is learned towards the end of the journey. And humble calmness that comes with recognizing that God is far beyond your comprehension, and yet has never failed you.

## Step 8- Remembering His Promise

### 132 God's Promise

*For Your servant David's sake,  
Do not turn away the face of Your <sup>[b]</sup>Anointed.*

*<sup>1</sup>The Lord has sworn in truth to David;  
He will not turn from it:  
"I will set upon your throne the <sup>[c]</sup>fruit of your body.*

- Looking forward to the promise that the Messiah, Son of David, will sit on the throne forever

## Step 9- Learning Unity

### 133 Becoming Unified

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is  
For brethren to dwell together in unity!*

*<sup>2</sup>It is like the precious oil upon the head,  
Running down on the beard,  
The beard of Aaron,  
Running down on the edge of his garments.*

**Israel Context:** acknowledges how good it was for the tribes to be united under God's covenant. It uses imagery of Aaron's anointing as high priest.

**Our Context:** In Christ now both Jew and Gentile are united under the new covenant.

Are you seeking unity in the body of Christ?

## Step 10- Praising in Spirit and in Truth

### 134 Conclusion of Praise- Bless the Lord

*Behold, bless the Lord,  
All you servants of the Lord,  
Who by night stand in the house of the Lord!  
<sup>2</sup>Lift up your hands in the sanctuary,  
And bless the Lord.*

*<sup>3</sup>The Lord who made heaven and earth  
Bless you from Zion!*

- The collection ends with simple praise to God

## How They Point to Jesus

**Psalm 121 (Keeper of Israel):** Jesus is the Good Shepherd who never slumbers (John 10).

Psalm 121:5

*<sup>5</sup>The Lord is your <sup>[b]</sup>keeper;  
The Lord is your shade at your right hand.*

John 10:11

*<sup>11</sup> "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.*

**Psalm 122 (Peace of Jerusalem):** Jesus wept over Jerusalem's rejection of Him (Luke 19:41-42) and will one day bring true peace in the New Jerusalem.

Psalm 122:6-7

*<sup>6</sup>Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
"May they prosper who love you.  
<sup>7</sup>Peace be within your walls,  
Prosperity within your palaces."*

Luke 19:41-42

*<sup>41</sup> Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, <sup>42</sup> saying, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace!*

- The Jews sang this Psalm for years, and then when Christ came they didn't recognize the One who was their peace was right in front of them

**Psalm 126 (Restoration):** Jesus brings ultimate deliverance and joy out of captivity to sin.

*<sup>5</sup>Those who sow in tears  
Shall reap in joy.  
<sup>6</sup>He who continually goes <sup>[c]</sup>forth weeping,  
Bearing <sup>[d]</sup>seed for sowing,  
Shall doubtless come again <sup>[e]</sup>with rejoicing,  
Bringing his sheaves with him.*

John 5

<sup>3</sup> *“Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

<sup>4</sup> *Blessed are those who mourn,  
For they shall be comforted.*

<sup>5</sup> *Blessed are the meek,  
For they shall inherit the <sup>[a]</sup>earth.*

<sup>6</sup> *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
For they shall be filled.*

- Jesus parallels the psalm, “those who sow tears will reap Joy”, with the beatitudes, a promise of restoration and healing for the broken.

**Psalm 130 (Forgiveness):** “With the Lord there is forgiveness”—fulfilled at the cross.

<sup>3</sup> *If You, Lord, should <sup>[a]</sup>mark iniquities,  
O Lord, who could stand?*

<sup>4</sup> *But there is forgiveness with You,  
That You may be feared.*

**Psalm 133 (Unity):** In Christ, Jews and Gentiles are united as one family (Eph. 2:14–16).

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is  
For brethren to dwell together in unity!*

Ephesians 2:14-16

<sup>14</sup> *For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, <sup>15</sup>having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup>and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.*

**Psalm 134 (Blessing in the House of the Lord):** Now fulfilled in worshiping God through Christ in spirit and truth

*Behold, bless the Lord,  
All you servants of the Lord,  
Who by night stand in the house of the Lord!*

John 4:23

<sup>23</sup> *But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.*

- The Samaritan woman at the well attempt to debate Jesus on where the correct place to worship God is. Jesus tells her there will come a time when true worship is not in the temple, or on the mountain, but in him

## Final takeaways

We've seen how these psalms paint a picture of our spiritual journey, and how they point to Jesus. What are some final thoughts that we can take away from all this?

### **The Journey matters**

We are all on a journey that serves a purpose. It's not just about where we are going. You can't wait until you are near the end to prioritize growing closer to God.

The Journey is meant to be a continuous "ascent" towards God.

### **It's a learning Experience**

Everything you endure in this life serves a purpose to teach you more about God, more about His Faithfulness, and more about how to trust.

Never stop learning about God, His Word, His Character, His Holiness, etc.

### **The Goal is Worship**

All the Psalms crescendo to a point that is exclusively worship and praise to God. The purpose of all things is that we would glorify Him as he deserves. Are you going to live out your purpose?