



The Ascent

On the Rise through the Psalms of Ascent

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<https://www.christrevealed.com/the-psalms-of-ascent/>

It's a bright, sunny autumn morning. The family is almost ready to set off, your father has his walking stick and your mother is helping your little sister tie on her sandals. You've been waiting all week for this day, and you barely slept last night—it's the Festival of Tabernacles, and this year your family is going to spend it in Jerusalem! Your mother passes each of you a piece of bread left from last night's dinner, and you are finally on your way. The long walk to the city will take all day—but you're used to walking long distances, and you've been looking forward to the trip almost as much as to the days you'll spend celebrating the long holiday.

The first part of the day is spent walking along dusty trails, the roads are far more crowded than usual as many other families are heading to the city as well. Around midday, your family stops in a village you've never been to. You gather under a fig tree to eat a hasty lunch of salted fish, raisins, and water drawn from the well that stands in the center of the village.

Then you're off again, walking with the growing crowd. The sun becomes so hot in the early afternoon that the walk suddenly seems long and terribly boring. You try to forget your aching feet and ignore the sweat that drips down your back, but you and your siblings are disciplined for arguing on more than one occasion.

But as the day wears on and the sun begins to drop, the band of travelers that's formed along the way perks up. Jerusalem is not far now, just a few hours away!

You can see the ground start to rise in front of you—and even catch a glimpse now and then of the holy city up ahead. The air is cooler, and everyone seems to get a second wind. Your family is joined by more and more people as you go, and as the ground begins to rise before you and the way becomes harder with the change in elevation, a man a few yards ahead begins to sing:

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

As if on cue, others join in. Their voices rise over the heat and dust of the road to Jerusalem, and you happily sing along to the Psalm that's always been one of your favorites, a Psalm of Ascent that's often sung on the road to Jerusalem:

*As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people,
from this time forth and forevermore.
... Peace be upon Israel!
(Psalm 125, ESV)*

<https://bible.org/seriespage/14-southern-steps-and-psalms-ascent-reminders>

Over the years, a songbook developed that served as the pilgrims' traveling songs. Psalms 120-134 all bear the superscription, "A Psalm of Ascents." These are the songs the Jews sang as they ascended to Jerusalem every year for their feasts. Some propose that these fifteen psalms were sung on the fifteen wide steps we see today in the Southern Steps excavations.

Think about Christmas carols and patriotic songs like, "God Bless America." Sung on holidays, these tunes are familiar to all and stir up critical reminders of basic life themes.

The first-century Jewish culture recognized the necessity of reminders and repetition—the need of rehearsing truth when the world around them countered God's Word at every step. The Psalms of Ascent that the pilgrims of old would recite from memory several times a year served as reminders of faith, forgiveness, family, children, peace, hope, brotherhood, sacrifice, and right attitudes toward God and people.

<https://www.bridgesforpeace.com/letter/psalms-of-ascent/>

Significant in Worship

The Psalms of Ascent have been and continue to be significant in worship for both the Jewish and Christian faiths. This collection of prayers, poetry, and songs is used for individual meditation, as well as for collective use in worship. During the time of the Temple, priests sang the Psalms of Ascent as they entered the Temple. It says in the Mishnah (first written recording of Jewish tradition), "On the fifteen steps which led into the women's court, corresponding with the fifteen songs of degrees, stood the Levites, with their musical instruments, and sang" (m. Sukkah 5:4-5). Even today, selections from the Psalter (a collection of psalms) are sung during worship services in many Christian churches. The Psalms of Ascent are also part of the Jewish prayer book, the Siddur (prayer book). Psalm 126 is one of the weekly Sabbath prayers and is also included on holidays, "When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream" (v.1).

The Psalms of Ascent would also have been memorized and sung as all the Jewish people traveled long distances to Jerusalem every year for the three pilgrimage festivals of the Lord. Deuteronomy 16:16 says, "Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed." These were appearances before the Lord by the individual, but the pilgrimages were also done as the entire nation of Israel. The festivals were times of great joy and anticipation as they went up to meet with the Lord. The Hebrew word for festival is מועד "mo-ed" (Strong's H4150). It means an appointed time or place; a sacred season or set feast. It was a time on God's calendar that was set aside for His people.

Jewish History of Ascent

When did the ascent up to Jerusalem begin? Abraham was the first one to go up to Jerusalem. At the very place where the Temple would one day stand, he was told to go up to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. In Genesis 22:8, Abraham tells Isaac, "My son, God will provide for Himself (Yehovah Yireh) the lamb for a burnt offering."

Jacob made the ascent and saw the stairway to heaven, with angels ascending and descending. He was awestruck by this place. In Genesis 28:17 Jacob says, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God (Bethel), and this is the gate of heaven!"

King David went up to Jerusalem and was visited by the Angel of the Lord. In 2 Samuel 24:24-25 we are told that he built an altar there. "Then the king said to Araunah, 'No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing.' So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. And David built there an altar to the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the Lord heeded the prayers for the land, and the plague was withdrawn from Israel." This is the site where his son, King Solomon, eventually built the Temple.

The Newer Testament tells us that Yeshua also made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem many times. He grew up in Nazareth in an observant Jewish family. They would have made the trek to Jerusalem three times a year for the Festivals of the Lord. This was not an easy journey in those days. It would have taken a young, fit male at least two days traveling if he were alone; and a group with children would need up to five days to travel the distance to Jerusalem. Walking routes would have been between 90-120 miles (144-193 kilometers) depending on the decision to pass through Samaria or not. People would have traveled together in groups to be safe from thieves, wild animals, and the elements. One such journey is described in the second chapter of Luke.

Mary and Joseph find Jesus

His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast. When they had finished the days, as they returned, the Boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem. And Joseph and His mother did not know it; but supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances. So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him. Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions (Luke 2:41-46).

The group was large enough on this trip that they didn't even notice that Jesus was not with them for an entire day. Jesus would have continued to make this pilgrimage at least three times every year, as it says in Exodus 23:17, "Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God." Before entering the Temple, each person went through one of the many mikvot (ritual baths) for purification (John 11:55). The pilgrims entered from the Southern Steps through the Hulda Gates and went up stairs to the Temple Mount.

As God established his set-apart people, Jerusalem, also called Zion, was so important to Him that He brought them up to this place. He established it as the place where He was to be worshiped; His presence was there; He is zealous for it; and He will establish it again in the future as the New Jerusalem.

The Songs of Ascent would have played a key role of remembrance, prayer, song, and worship for all the Jewish people and the priesthood as well.

As believers, we are on a spiritual pilgrimage or journey with the Lord. Psalm 84:5-7 describes the individual journey we make:

Blessed is the man whose strength is in You,

Whose heart is set on pilgrimage.

As they pass through the Valley of Baca (weeping), they make it a spring;

The rain also covers it with pools.

They go from strength to strength;

Each one appears before God in Zion.

What is a Psalm of Ascent?

Psalms of Ascent are songs that were often sung on the way to Jerusalem (and, perhaps also by priests going up the steps of the Temple). Jerusalem was built on a hilltop, and to visit the holy city was an upward climb for those from all the cities that surrounded it. Jewish people often went to Jerusalem during feast days, to make sacrifices or visit the temple and celebrate the holy festivals that happened throughout the year.

In Hebrew, the word translated as "ascent" is ma'alah (מעלה), which means ascent or degree and indicates a movement upward. There are 15 Psalms of Ascent, Psalms 120 to 134. Out of the 15, four were written by King David: Psalm 122, 124, 131 and 133. David's son Solomon wrote Psalm 127, and the author of the others is not mentioned in the Bible.

These Psalms would have been memorized and sung as people made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. All males were required to appear in Jerusalem three times a year, at the major festivals: The Festival of Unleavened Bread (Passover), the Festival of Weeks, and the Festival of Tabernacles. These songs were a tradition as pilgrims climbed to the holy city, ready to celebrate and worship with others as they flooded the Temple grounds offering sacrifices.

Fifteen psalms, chapters 120-134 of the Book of Psalms, begin with the words, "A song of ascents."

Many interpretations have been given for these ambiguous words. Here are a few of them:

- A. In the Holy Temple courtyard, there was an ultra wide stairway that consisted of fifteen large, semi-circular steps that "ascended" into the inner section of the courtyard. The Levites, whose job it was to accompany the Temple service with song and instrumental music, would stand on these steps and sing these fifteen psalms.
- B. These psalms were sung on a high "ascendant" musical note.
- C. These psalms were sung starting in a low tone of voice and steadily ascending to a higher one.
- D. These psalms were sung by the Jews who ascended from Babylon to Israel in the times of Ezra the Scribe.

The 15 Psalms of Ascent

What are the Psalms of Ascent about? Here are the 15 Psalms:

Psalm 120 is a cry of distress to the Lord, from someone who has suffered greatly.

Psalm 121 is a song of praise to the true God who helps and protects us.

Psalm 122 sings of the joy the Israelites had in the city of Jerusalem.

Psalm 123 cries out for mercy from the Lord.

Psalm 124 tells the story of how God has saved His people from destruction.

Psalm 125 is about dwelling in the peace of God.

Psalm 126 predicts the future of Jerusalem, and how God's people will be gathered there.

Psalm 127 is a reminder that without God, we can do nothing.

Psalm 128 speaks of the importance of the fear of the Lord.

Psalm 129 is a song of victory over Israel's enemies.

Psalm 130 is about our hope in the Lord.

Psalms 131 reminds us to wait on the Lord and place our hopes on Him.

Psalms 132 tells of the importance of Jerusalem (Zion).

Psalms 133 is a joyful song about the power of unity among God's people.

Psalms 134 is a worship song about the certainty we have in the Lord and the power of His word.

An Introductory Overview of Psalms

<http://www.rossmoorbiblestudy.org/lessons/psalms.pdf>

OVERVIEW: The Psalms have had a rich history both for Israel and the church through the centuries since God breathed on the hearts and souls of men such as David to write these songs to encourage and prepare the hearts of God's people for worship. These specific Psalms (120-134) are unique, in that these were probably chanted by Hebrew pilgrims as they approached Jerusalem to attend one of the Old Testament's annual worship festivals.

The Psalms as individual songs (all 150) were written at various times in Israel's history, but most were clearly post-exilic (i.e. after 539 B.C.). As a collection, 116 have titles and 100 indicate an author. 73 are attributed to David, others are identified as Moses (90), Solomon (72,127), Asaph (50, 73-83), Heman (88), Ehan (89), and the group called the Sons of Korah (42, 44-49, 84-85, 87).

The Psalms are divided into five books:

Book I: 1-41

Book II: 42-72

Book III: 73-89

Book IV: 90-106

Book V: 107-150

The division of these books do have some significance. For instance:

1. Davidic Group I: 3-41
2. Sons of Korah Group I: 42-49
3. Davidic Group II: 51-65
4. Asaph Group: 73-83
5. Sons of Korah Group II: 84-88
6. Congregational Praise Group I: 95-100
7. Halleluyah Group: 111-117
- 8. Songs of Ascent to Jerusalem: 120-134**
9. Davidic Group III: 138-145
10. Congregational Praise Group II: 146-150

The purpose of showing these groupings is to show that the Psalms (songs) are not randomly compiled or chronologically arranged, but that they show there is a definitive and purposeful in their arrangement.

What is the literary history and definition of a psalm? The English designation "psalm" comes from the Latin *Psalmi* and the Greek "psalmoi" (songs sung with musical accompaniment). The Hebrew word is "mizmor" (a song accompanied by musical instruments).

WHAT ARE THE PSALMS? First and foremost, the Psalms are God's Word to His people. They not only tell us about who He is, but they are like all Scripture, "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3.16-17).

The value of the Psalms both corporately and to the individual are: (Expositors Bible Commentary: Psalms)

1. Book of **Prayers**: Teaching humans how to have communion with God through prayer.
2. Book of **Praise**: Showing the proper response of praise that the Lord deserves.
3. Book of **Liturgy**: These songs have been sung or chanted by God's people to prepare for worship, used in worship, and in service to Him.
4. Book of **Inspiration**: These songs inspire the believer with hope of God's kingdom by showing His justice, righteousness and hope of eternal bliss.
5. Book of **Faith**: These songs reflect the faith experience of God's community of faith. Revealing their frustration, impatience, anger, joy and tension between promise and alienation.
6. Book of **Community**: God addresses both the individual and community
7. Book of **Redemption**: The value of the Psalms lies in the connection between the OT and NT as it speaks to longing for the day of the redemption of the Lord.

The message of the Psalms are divinely inspired poems or songs intended for the use in worship.

The subject of the Psalms is worship.

Worship is the act of offering to God what is due to Him because of who He is. In this worship, the Psalm pictures the attitude of humility and submission to God as the superior person and object of worship. In most cases, Jerusalem in the central place of worship (Israel's central sanctuary) on His holy hill (Mt. Zion) were the people worship in fear, awe, and joy the Lord their God.

- The Psalms captures "**Yahweh**" as the essential being of God. His name occurs often. God is the eternally self-existent Person who becomes all that His people need (Psalm 23.1).
- "**Elohim**" is the second great name of God that is used in the Psalms. It is translated as "God" in our English Bibles. This name expresses the essential might and power of God. Strength not just in potential, but kinetic (in motion). Such is the reason the writers are often in "awe" of the Lord (Psalm 68).
- The title, "**Adonai**" (Lord in the sense of Master) does not occur frequently, but the idea it expresses is constantly present (Psalm 86). Thus, whenever a person, king, nation or race conceives of God as Yahweh, Elohim, or Adonai, the result is worship.

The attitude of worship is also captured in the Psalms. We observe people responding to the revelation of God joyfully, trustfully, and submissively. The application of this is that when believers understand that God Himself is the adequate resource for us, we should worship by rejoicing in Him alone. When we learn that God is sovereign, we should respond in worship by submitting to Him. When we appreciate God's grace in providing all we need, we should rejoice.

Submission to the sovereignty of God expresses itself in reverence and obedience in the Psalms. Reverence is the external evidence of submission to God, and obedience is the core proof of it. This means, the person (believer) will really believe that God is the ultimate authority and shows this through reverence and respect that he or she can only yield to Him. This humble worship is expressed through the action of kneeling in reverence, bowing humbling to His will throughout the Psalms. We often see that their commitment to trust often followed their frustration.

Another revelation of worship in the Psalms is seen in the activities of worship.

Worship is always a response to something that God has done. God elicits worship. Man does not initiate it on his own...God initiates worship, and man responds by worshipping, God becomes to the worshipper all that he or she needs. God is found faithful and true in His dealing with worshippers. He becomes everything for us. Everything we need when we worship Him. Thus, the activities of worship begins and ends with God... They end with His drawing us to Himself.