

Stepping Up

*a journey through the
Psalms of Ascent*

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Introductory Session

Welcome to a study of the Psalms of Ascent. Hopefully you will find this study of the Word of God completely unique from others we may have shared. Today we'll stand together at the starting line of the path God has paved for us and catch the vision for what's ahead. This entire session is dedicated to answering two questions: What are the Psalms of Ascent, and what do they have to do with us?

1. The Psalms of Ascent are a compilation of 15 psalms extending from Psalm 120 to 134.

2. The Hebrew transliteration for *ascent* is *ma'aloth* meaning to go up.

3. Through the centuries the Psalms of Ascent have shared the following three associations:

- Read Deuteronomy 16:16-17. These songs were sung on the pilgrimage to the Three Great Feasts (compare Ex. 23:14).

Because of these commands the Three Great Feasts were also called the Pilgrimage Feasts. Cross-reference Psalm 84:5-7 and Hebrews 12:18-19,22-24.

- According to the Talmud¹, the 15 psalms somehow developed a connection to 15 steps of the temple. (See the temple diagram.) So strong is the association with steps of some kind that the Septuagint, Latin Vulgate, and Jerome labeled each psalm "a song of the steps." Consider the following proposal of a daily practice as we seek to "go up" to the next level with God: Those of us who desire to participate will take our places on our faces.

- These songs were sung by exiles returning to Jerusalem after Babylonian captivity.

1. The collection of ancient Rabbinic writings relegating much of orthodox Judaism. Reference to 15 steps: b. Sukk. 51b; b. Mid. 2:5.

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SESSION ONE

Where Will My Help Come From?

If you are participating in the homework and were able to complete week 1, by this time you have placed both feet on the first two psalms and one foot on the third. You also know by now that Psalm 121 will comprise our memory work for this six-week series. In today's session you and I will focus on the psalms as songs. To grasp more of the significance, we will view the element of song beyond the psalms.

1. Song originated with God and accompanied creation (Job 38:7).

In Scripture singing is attributed to both God the Father
and Christ the Son

(Zeph. 3:17, NIV; Matt. 26:30, HCSB; Heb. 2:10-12).

2. Emotions and experiences can be expressed through
song in ways spoken words can never satisfy
(Jas. 5:13; Ps. 13; Hos. 2:14-15).

3. A song greatly enhances the ability of the human mind to
memorize (Deut. 31:19-22).

4. See Ezekiel 33:30-32. We can think a song is beautiful and
memorize its words yet remain completely unaffected
by what it says. Consider the relevance of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:15 in
our present context: "I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing
with my mind."

5. A song can change our entire perspective (Acts 16:24-26).
A song can also greatly affect the heart of God.

6. See Revelation 5:13. In the *New International Commentary of the New Testament*,
Robert Mounce describes this scene as "the adoration of the entire
created world." In ways beyond our comprehension,
the gift of song is not limited to humans and angels.

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SESSION TWO

Our Eyes Look to the Lord

In our introduction we talked about the strong association between the Psalms of Ascent and the Three Great Feasts or Pilgrim Feasts. Today we will consider the first of those feasts; in sessions 3 and 4 we'll consider the next two. We will consider each of the feasts and the parallels they pose to us as New Testament sojourners on our way to the heavenly Jerusalem.

Part One

The Old Testament Emphasis on the Feast (Read Lev. 23:4-11,14 and Deut. 16:1-4.)

- The first of the Pilgrim Feasts was the Feast of Unleavened Bread.
- This feast began at sundown at the conclusion of Passover and lasted for the next seven days.
- They ate unleavened bread on the first Passover because they were to eat in haste, ready at any moment to depart.

Part Two

The New Testament Emphasis on the Feast

- See Luke 2:41 for the first mention of Jesus' own participation.
- See Matthew 16:5-9. Leaven became symbolic of sin. *The Feasts of the Lord* explains "In Hebrew, leaven is known as *chametz*, which literally means 'sour.' Leaven (usually yeast or baking powder) is used to

produce fermentation." *The Feasts of the Lord* goes on to say that "ancient rabbis also believed that leaven represents the evil impulses of the heart."¹ This fermentation implied a process of corruption.

- *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* adds an interesting picture of the process: The "leaven" consisted, so far as the evidence goes, of a piece of fermented dough kept over from a former baking... The lump of dough thus preserved was either dissolved in water in the kneading trough before the flour was added, or was "hid" in the flour... and kneaded along with it. Compare 1 Corinthians 5:7-8.

Part Three

The Symbolism Fulfilled in Christ

- Read Matthew 26:17,26; then consider Acts 2:29-33.
- Recall Leviticus 23:4-11.

According to *The Feasts of the Lord* ...

- (1) Passover pictures the death of the Messiah.
- (2) The Feast of Unleavened Bread pictures the burial of the Messiah.
- (3) Firstfruits pictures the resurrection of the Messiah.
(See 1 Cor. 15:20-24.)

1. Adapted from Kevin Howard and Marvin Rosenthal, *The Feasts of the Lord* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 65-72.

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SESSION THREE

He Surrounds His People

We are devoting three sessions to the Pilgrim Feasts because they hold such important associations with the Psalms of Ascent. In session 2 we talked about the first Pilgrim Feast on Israel's biblical calendar: the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Today we'll turn our attentions to the second Pilgrim Feast: the Feast of Weeks, which occurred in the early summer.

Read Deuteronomy 16:9-12 and consider the following explorations of Israel's Feast of Weeks.

1. The Feast of Weeks (Hebrew *Shavuot*) derives its name from the seven weeks, separating it from the Feast of Firstfruits. Its commemoration on the fiftieth day earned it the Greek name of Pentecost.
2. The Feast of Weeks much later became associated with the giving of the law at Sinai (Ex. 19:1).
3. The Feast of Weeks was a time for remembering their former bondage.

4. The Feast of Weeks was a time for great generosity.

- Generous grace
- Generous giving —A Bible commentary describes the freewill offering of the Israelites at the Feast of Weeks as “a freewill, spontaneous tribute of gratitude to God for His temporal bounties (see Deut. 16:9-12).

5. The Feast of Weeks was also called the Feast of the Harvest (Ex. 23:16).

- Corporate significance: Acts 2:41. The specific timing of this event on Pentecost offers little doubt that God intended a highly significant feast of harvest.
- Personal significance: Galatians 6:9-10. In *The Feasts of the Lord* we are told that “because of the commandment to count, the time period from Firstfruits to Shavuot is known as *Sefirah*,”¹ a Hebrew word meaning *counting*.

1. Ken Howard and Marvin Rosenthal, *The Feasts of the Lord*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 90.

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SESSION FOUR

A Fruitful Vine

Read Deuteronomy 16:13-17.

Consider the following distinctive elements of the Feast of Tabernacles and their significance during the time Christ traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate.

1. The great invitation to joy (Deut. 16:15)

2. The strong emphasis on Messiah (Ps. 118:24-26)

- Compare Leviticus 23:40 and Matthew 21:1-9.

- See Matthew 17:4.

3. The beauty of the lights (2 Chron. 5:3). See John 8:12.

4. The celebration of water pouring. See Isaiah 12:3; then John 7:37-39.

Not coincidentally, Christ made the offer of “streams
of living Water.”

5. The coinciding name: the Feast of Ingathering
(John 14:2-3; Rev. 7:9-10)

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SESSION FIVE

My Hope Is in the Lord

As we continue our pilgrimage through the Psalms of Ascent, we will focus on one of the most vital elements of the journey: our fellow pilgrims. Today we're going to talk about how to be the best possible traveling partners.

Jeremiah 41:1-10 will set our stage today. The seventh month indicates with near certainty that the 80 pilgrims were coming to Jerusalem for the Feast of

Tabernacles.

Because Ishmael was so sly in his wickedness, the following casualties resulted:

- 70 pilgrims were slaughtered.
- 70 paid heavy tribute to their enemy.
- All the remaining people in Mizpah were taken captive, including the king's daughters.

We too face huge opposition as we journey toward Mount Zion to celebrate the ultimate Feast of Tabernacles with God.

How can we be effective fellow sojourners on the way?

1. Wise up concerning the Enemy's schemes.

Second Corinthians 2:10-11 tells us to forgive people "in the sight of Christ ... in order that Satan might not outwit us.

For we are not unaware of his schemes."

2. Read Hebrews 10:24-25. Encourage one another.

3. Read 1 Peter 4:7-8. Love each other deeply.*

4. Fill in the following blanks according to Nehemiah 4:16-18. This segment describes how the exiles who returned in pilgrimage to Jerusalem responded to vicious opposition as they sought to rebuild the temple: "From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked."

If we don't want to be counted among countless Christian casualties in our pilgrimage, we too have to learn to fight for each other instead of with each other.

*Excerpts are from Randy Frazee's *Making Room for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003) and John Ortberg's *Everybody's Normal 'Til You Get to Know Them* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

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SESSION SIX

Blessings from Zion

Today we conclude our journey together through the Psalms of Ascent. Our concluding thoughts will center on four ways to have the most satisfying pilgrimage possible.

Lamentations 1:4, The Message

1. See Jeremiah 31:21. Survey the road you are on.

Philippians 1:9-10; Psalm 19:11

2. See Hebrews 12:1-2. Let go of the loads

God wants to loosen.

3. See Psalm 84:1-7. Take the next step with the next strength.

Compare Isaiah 40:28-31.

4. Conclude with Isaiah 35:3-10. Know with certainty that the

destination is worth the trip.

Psalm 134:3