

“The Pilgrimage Songs: Journey On & Sing On...”

The Songs of Ascent for the New Testament Christian

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Psalms 120-134 all have the same superscription (title): “A song of Ascents” [שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת; *shir ha'maalot*]. Scholars have presented various viewpoints as to how ancient Israelites incorporated these psalms as they journeyed to the Zion to worship the Lord. But it seems that the best understanding is that this collection of 15 hymns comprised the devotional hymnbook for Israelites as they would journey to Zion for the three annual pilgrimage feasts (Passover, Tabernacles, and Pentecost). And as they began far away (at home) and traversed upward to Zion they would reflect on divine truth, meditate on these hymns, anticipate the community of worshipers, and long for true *Shalom* [peace]. But how can New Testament believers today interpret and *apply* these precious psalms? There is no temple for us. There is no pilgrimage we must take. How can the believer today read and understand these precious, eternal, God-given poems?

As we journey on, as New Testament Christians, how can we benefit from the Songs of Ascent? I will provide four simple headings to aid in our understanding of these hymns.

1. Singing [*Acclaim*]

The psalms of ascent are really the *songs* of ascents. They are to be sung by the Jewish people as they ascend up to Jerusalem to worship. In fact, Isaiah 30:29 clarifies this when the prophet says: “You will have songs as in the night when you keep the festival, and gladness of heart as when one marches to the sound of the flute, to go to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel.” So as the pilgrims would obediently journey to the Temple three times a year they would do so with gladness of heart and with songs on their lips. Believers today must also journey with gladness in our hearts and with songs on our lips. Also, Paul instructs believers to encourage one another with songs.

2. Reflecting [*Apprehend*]

A theme that occurs so often in the Scriptures is that of remembering, reflecting, and apprehending divine truth. How often does God tell his people to “remember”! All through the Torah, through the Psalms and the Prophets, and then into the New Testament, the Lord Jesus institutes two ordinances (baptism and communion) so as to *remember* Him and His work of redemption on behalf of His people. As the Israelites of old would travel from their homes to Zion, they would meditate upon and remember God’s truth. Without simple reminders, we forget essential truths.

3. Anticipating [*Anticipate*]

How the hearts of the godly long to be in God’s presence! God’s people crave the community of believers! The psalmist reflects one who lived amongst the wicked and earnestly desired to be where God dwelt, where God’s people gathered, and where worship would occur communally! Believers, today, must also live with anticipation just as the Jews of old who traveled and anticipated more and more the closer they came to Zion. Anticipation grew as they drew near to the Lord’s Temple in Jerusalem. So also, our anticipation should grow daily for the heavenly Zion!

4. Gathering [*Assemble*]

An intimate bond exists between the people of God. There is an unbreakable, eternal, Christ-centered, and happy bond between worshipers who love God, love Christ, love Scripture, and love each other. The pilgrims of old who journeyed to Jerusalem meditated on the need for this commonality amongst the people of God. They longed to gather together. So it is today with us. We gather together regularly, corporately, willingly, and happily for fellowship.