

Psalms Of Ascents

Songs of Our Pilgrimage

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Most of you, being Bible readers and students of the Bible, are generally aware of the story of Hezekiah, King of Judah. Hezekiah reigned 29 years right about the time of Israel's fall to Assyria.

Now of course, Hezekiah was the king of Judah, but that did not mean that the people in Judah were not affected by what was going on in Israel. The empire of Assyria was quite strong, and it was intimidating, if not conquering, just about every nation in the region.

II Chronicles devotes four entire chapters to the life of Hezekiah, especially to his reign. And that is more than most kings get in the Bible. It is twice as much as is given to Josiah, in that same book. Josiah is only given two chapters in Chronicles, which is kind of strange, because Josiah was such a good king. Most kings are lucky to get one chapter. Some of them just get parts of a chapter, or a few verses, "Well, his reign was bad, let us go onto the next one...."

Hezekiah lived in a time of great tumult, a time of historical significance; and fortunately for Judah, he was one of the better kings, though not necessarily the best. You might put David and Josiah up there on the top rank, whereas you would probably put Hezekiah on the same rank as maybe Asa and Jehoshaphat because, frankly, Hezekiah had his problems, which we find out in these particular chapters that are devoted to him. But he was righteous and repentant enough to lead the people of Judah through some rather stressful times.

Now, II Kings also records Hezekiah's life in three chapters, not four; and it adds details to his life that are not recorded in II Chronicles. In addition to this, Hezekiah reigned during Isaiah's lifetime so that there are actually four more chapters—Isaiah 36 through 39—that are about Hezekiah in the book of Isaiah too.

So, this particular king, if you add them all up, gets 11 chapters devoted to him across all the Old Testament.

God, then, makes sure in three different books that we realize just what Hezekiah did, particularly during three significant crises during his reign, and his reactions to them provide helpful lessons for us so that we can make or not make the same sorts of

decisions that he did.

Now, one of these crises has a relationship with our sermon today. Please turn to II Kings 20. (By the way, this story is also found in II Chronicles 32:24-26, and Isaiah 38:1-8.) This is the occasion where Hezekiah's life is extended by 15 years after his heartfelt prayer.

II Kings 20:1 In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, went to him and said to him, "Thus says the LOORD: 'Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.'"

Now, I want to mention here that Hezekiah was about 39 years old at this time and was childless. So, Isaiah's visit and instruction to set his house in order was essentially saying, "Figure out who is going to be the next king."

II Kings 20:2-6 Then he turned his face toward the wall, and prayed to the LOORD, saying, "Remember now, O LOORD, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart, and have done what was good in Your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. And it happened, before Isaiah had gone out into the middle court, that the word of the LOORD came to him, saying, "Return and tell Hezekiah the leader of My people, 'Thus says the LOORD, the God of David your father: "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LOORD. "And I will add to your days fifteen years. I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake, and for the sake of My servant David.'"

I want to add here that He had promised David that He would not lack a man to sit on his throne. Of course, there were probably cousins, uncles, and whatnot that He could have chosen from, but He particularly wanted a son of Hezekiah, and so, in order to preserve what He told David, He granted Hezekiah 15 more years.

II Kings 20:7 Then Isaiah said, "Take a lump of figs." So they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered.

This gives you a sense that Hezekiah was not immediately healed. It was not like Jesus going out and touching someone and they were immediately made well. This was

something where there was a little bit of time for the healing to take place.

II Kings 20:8 And Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "What is the sign that the LOORD will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the LOORD the third day?"

So Hezekiah was looking at this mass of figs on his boil, and was asking, "Okay, you've applied the figs, and you've told me that God says that He's going to heal me, but how do I know for sure? This is going to take a while. May I have a bit of confidence, here?"

II Kings 20:9-11 Then Isaiah said, "This is the sign to you from the LOORD, that the LOORD will do the thing which He has spoken: shall the shadow go forward ten degrees or go backward ten degrees?" [God gives him a choice.] And Hezekiah answered, "It is an easy thing for the shadow to go down ten degrees [naturally]; no, but let the shadow go backward ten degrees [which is against nature]." So Isaiah the prophet cried out to the LOORD, and He brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down on the sundial of Ahaz.

So, we know the story. We have probably read it several times.

The thing, though, that we need to take away from this story is that shadow returned 10 degrees on the sundial. It looked as though time went backwards. But, actually all the Bible says is that the shadow went backward 10 degrees. It was a miracle. Somehow in the refraction of the light, going through the atmosphere, who knows how God did it, He actually made the shadow go back 10 degrees. There is no indication from the Bible that we lost some time, or that we went back in time at all. The earth did not stop spinning. All it says is that God worked a miracle in the way that they perceived the shadow on the sundial. I keep saying this because there some dispute about what this sundial actually was.

Was this a sundial like you might find today, where you have this round table-like disc with a style or pin sticking up? And as the sun hits it, it shows you the approximate time of day? Or was is something like the Babylonians had at the time which was some sort of a pillar that was near or on some steps, so that when the sunlight passed the pillar, the shadow would move along the steps? So it would go down the steps, and you would see time progressing.

So, we see, then, that this was the miracle that God performed. Hezekiah was obviously

satisfied—this was a wondrous thing to see the shadow go back; so this was the sign that God had granted Him 15 more years of life.

Now, the shadow went back 10 degrees, but he was granted 15 years of life.

As I have mentioned, Manasseh, who eventually became his heir, was not yet born. The accounts in II Kings and II Chronicles both say that Manasseh came to the throne when Hezekiah died, at the age of 12 years. This means that Manasseh was not born until about three years after this episode. We can conclude that Hezekiah was childless at this time of his life.

The extra 15 years gave him time to father a son and for the boy to mature a bit before taking the throne. But unfortunately for Judah that did not work out very well, because Manasseh was one of the worst kings of Judah. He reigned for 55 idolatrous years, but he is recorded to have repented toward the end of his life. But after 55 years of idolatry, the damage was already done. Of course, the people followed their leader, and they were idolatrous too, and things went from bad to worse, only getting any better during the reign of Josiah.

And, you might think that was the end of that. But, II Kings 20 does not record everything. We often find different details that fill out the story from other accounts. Well, Isaiah 38:9-11 adds something to this story.

(By the way, if you go through this whole passage later, you will find that it appears that Isaiah pulled this story from II Kings 20, but in pulling it out, he left something out as he was going through the story, and evidently he could not stick it back in where it belonged, so he tacked it onto the end of the chapter in verses 21 and 22, making them out of sequence. They probably should actually go after about verse 8.)

Isaiah 38:9-10 This is the writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness: I said, "In the prime of my life I shall go to the gates of Sheol; I am deprived of the remainder of my years."

What we see here, what the other accounts do not mention, is that after being granted his life and being healed of this, Hezekiah wrote a song about his experience. He wrote a poem, which Isaiah recorded.

Again, he was 39 years old at this point. He was in the prime of his life, as he said in

verse 10, "In the prime of my life I shall go to the gates of Sheol," "I am going to go to the grave; I am going to die!" This is what he was thinking before he was healed. And here he was, in the prime of his life, and he did not have an heir, and he was going to die. And, he thought of himself as a failure; he wept bitterly, because he was in a state where he had been shaken to his core.

So, he was very unsettled. But, God had saved him. Obviously, that filled him with great joy and hope, that he could have an heir and his life would mean something; that he could do something more with his life and his reign. So, he expressed this in a song or poem.

Let us go to verse 17 through 20. This is at the end of his song.

Isaiah 38:17 Indeed it was for my own peace that I had great bitterness...

This would be better translated something like, "I was so bitter because I was concerned and mourning my welfare." Welfare is better than "peace." And, some of the more modern translations will use the term "welfare." "Indeed, it was for my own welfare that I had great bitterness."

Isaiah 38:17 But You have lovingly delivered my soul from the pit of corruption, for You have cast all my sins behind Your back.

Not only do we see a great healing done, but there was also that his sins had been forgiven; that the sickness that had come upon him was because of sin. And it is particularly mentioned in II Chronicles that it was because of his great pride.

So, not only was he healed, but he was also forgiven.

Isaiah 38:18 For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot praise You; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your truth.

See what he was thinking? If he had died, there was no way that he could do anything—he could not praise God, he could not thank God, he could not continue to learn the truth of God and put it into practice.

Isaiah 38:19 The living, the living man, he shall praise You, as I do this day;

the father shall make known Your truth to the children.

Now he is adding, "Okay! I am now alive! God has spared my life. I have an opportunity to continue to learn God's truth, to learn what is right, and I want to pass this knowledge onto my children, letting them know what has happened to me and help them to learn this lesson."

Now, verse 20 is the one that we really want:

Isaiah 38:20 "The LOORD was ready to save me; therefore we will sing my songs with stringed instruments all the days of our life, in the house of the LOORD."

So, here he gives this wonderful song; he is very exuberant over his miraculous healing. And so, he thanks and praises God for his life, the forgiveness of his sins, and promises to pass down these lessons to his children. And then he says that he is going to compose songs that are to be sung or played at the temple all the days of his life. He is going to leave something—an inheritance—some sort of legacy in these songs so that other people can learn what he learned.

Now, this is where the sermon comes into play, (as you can tell, this has been another one of those *Richardesque Introductions*) because it is this verse—verse 20—that gave an idea to a theologian named, J. W. Thirtle. This idea has since become known as *Thirtle's Theory*. If you wish to read about that more thoroughly, the most accessible place to find it is Appendix 67 of the *Companion Bible*. This is also where Bullinger, the author of *The Companion Bible*, goes over the Psalms of Ascents, or what is sometimes known as the Psalms of Degrees, the subject of today's sermon.

Thirtle connected the 10 degrees that the shadow went back on the sundial, or went back on the steps, with the songs of degrees or ascents (steps), which are the 15 psalms found between Psalm 120 and Psalm 134. They are found in the King James Version as the Psalms of Degrees, while in the New King James Version, they are called the Psalms of Ascents. One of the reasons why he saw this—why Thirtle made this jump—is that he saw that the word for "steps" in the story of Hezekiah's great miracle of healing is *ma'alo*th which is also found in these psalms translated, then, as degrees or ascents. So the word "steps" in Hezekiah's history is from *ma'alo*th, which was translated as either degrees or ascents.

Now Thirtle's theory is that Hezekiah himself composed 10 songs, one for each of the ten degrees or steps that the shadow went back. So he did ten songs of degrees. But, are there not 15 Psalms of Degrees between Psalm 120, and 134? Yes, there are 15 songs of degrees. All we would have to do is return to Psalm 120, see the superscriptions before each psalm, and see that there are ten anonymous songs between 120 and 134, but there are five that do give an author's name. Four of these are attributed to David and one is attributed to Solomon. Ten, plus four, plus one equals fifteen. This 15 is also a significant number in that miracle, because fifteen was the number of years of life that he was granted.

So, Hezekiah did 10 songs of degrees for the 10 steps the shadow went back, and he added 5 other songs to it to equal 15 which were equal to the number of years that were given to him.

Now, this is an interesting idea. It is interesting and fun to chase out. But, it is not without its problems. It may not be the real answer to this, because a few of the songs actually appear to have been written later than Hezekiah's lifetime. They may have been written during the time of Ezra when the Jews returned from exile.

So, I am not saying that this *Thirtle's Theory* is a perfect one and that it covers all the bases. But, it is very interesting.

But today, we are going to look at the Psalms of Ascents (and we are going to try to call them Psalms of Ascents, because I think that is actually a better translation of the term) in a bit more detail. What we are going to try to do is extract a lesson or two from them and maybe even better, we are going to construct a framework for understanding how they apply to us today, so that when you want to study them, you can use this framework to get more out of them and apply them to your life.

Now, *Thirtle's Theory* is not the only idea about the Psalms of Ascents. There are many more, actually. And, you get any commentator or theologian looking at and seeing a group, he wants to know why there are groups like that. It is obvious that these 15 psalms are grouped together. They are all titled *A Psalm of Ascents*.

So, the commentators down through the centuries have called them in their own writings, "A Psalter within the Psalter," or as one put it, "A Little Psalter." It is like a book within a book in which you can pull it out of the surrounding Psalms and have a whole of the Psalms in a sense. You can have maybe the wide expanse of the psalms in these 15; that they are a special group for some reason, because they obviously have a formal arrangement as a group of 15.

Many have asked, why? What is their purpose?

And for good reason, most of the speculation centers on the *ma'aloth* translated "ascents." Notice that I said "ascents." It is a plural term. Usually if you see a Hebrew term ending in *-oth*, that means that it is a feminine plural. The masculine plural is the ending *-im* which you see often in Hebrew terms, such as *Elohim*. This is also why we have always said that it was a plural noun, but it was always used in a singular sense.

Elohim is a masculine term, while *ma'aloth* is a feminine term. Just keep them in mind for when you see a Hebrew word with either of these two endings, it is in the plural.

If we were to literally translate this term *ma'aloth*, it would be "goings up," or "journeys up." Goings up is the most literal. The idea, though, behind the term is "moving upward in steps." It is not just moving upward, but rather moving upward in steps, or stages, or by degrees, or maybe the term "gradually." You go a while, then you pause; you then go a little further, then you pause again. You keep going up. The idea, here, is that these are psalms having something to do with going up—not just going up, but "goings up;" more than one going up.

So the idea is moving upward in stages, in steps, by degrees, or gradually; goings up. But, what kind of stepping up or going up is the bone of contention. How is this "goings up" accomplished? Where is it? When is it? How is it? That is why you get all these different theories.

First of all, we have Thirtle's theory, which posits that the steps are literal degrees of the sundial of Ahaz that went backward for king Hezekiah.

Another idea is that the steps again are literal steps, but these are the fifteen steps from the Court of Women to the Court of Israel found in the temple. Now, we do know that there were fifteen steps there. But, what has been added to this understanding in terms of the Psalms of Ascents is that it is supposed that the Levitical Choir sang these particular Psalms while standing on those 15 steps during the Fall Festival Season. So you would have The Great Choir of Levites, who stand on these steps, and would sing these Psalms to the crowds which thronged around them while in Jerusalem at the time.

This seems like a good idea, but it is not known conclusively. This is only guessed at from hints in the Talmud and some early apocryphal literature. So, we do not know if that is actually the case. We know the steps were there, and perhaps the Levites sang from those steps, but we are not sure at all if they sang these particular songs.

A third conjecture is that the title—Psalms of Ascents—is really a notation of a long lost and forgotten musical style. If you know your psalms, you will know that when you go through the various ones, some will say that this is to the tune of this particular thing, or this is to be sung as this, or this is a Maschil, or however it is titled. What this means is that this is just another musical notation to the person reading the psalm or singing the psalm of how he is supposed to sing it.

Now, some have thought that because these are called the Psalms of Ascents, that perhaps the song began in a low key and then ends on a higher one. Or maybe began in a minor key and ended in a major key. That there was some sort of change from lower to upper that happens during the song.

Others have said that they think that it might begin *piano* (the Italian term for “softly”), and ended the piece *forte* (the Italian term for “loudly”), that the song gradually built up through a slow constant crescendo all the way to the end.

But, this is just speculation. Nobody knows. The wording of these psalms does not always square with this idea very well. The wording of the psalms appears to tend to go the other way, or maybe just sort of flat all the way through. It does not seem to build up like this would demand. There is no proof in history, or archeology, or any of the literature that this is the case.

There is another theory, which has several well known advocates, among them Keil and Delitzsch (who did an Old Testament commentary), which is similar to the last one in that these psalms are written in a gradually ascending manner. The wording of them is written in a gradually ascending manner. It takes a word or an idea from a preceding place, and then repeats it and expands on it in the next. Turn to Psalm 121 where there is one that we can actually see in the scripture—this may have some merit to it.

This is the second of the Psalms of Ascents. I intend to read through this, and I will emphasize the words that are taken and expanded.

Psalm 121:1-2 I will lift up my eyes to the hills [this is a very famous Psalm]—from whence comes my **help**? **My help** comes from the Lord who made the heaven and earth.

Do you see how it took the one word in the question, “Where is my help?” and then expands on it, “My help comes from the Lord.”

Psalm 121:3-4 He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not **slumber**. Behold, He who keeps Israel Shall neither **slumber** nor **sleep**.

Here, there is a slight expansion on the idea that God does not even fall asleep.

Psalm 121:5-6 The LOORD is **your keeper** [this one is a bit trickier]; the LOORD is **your shade** at your right hand. [And then he expands on that some more through description:] The sun **shall not strike you by day**, nor **the moon by night**.

So, here is the idea of sun and shade is expanded in the next verse.

Psalm 121:7-8 The LOORD shall **preserve** you from all evil; He shall **preserve** your soul. The LOORD shall **preserve** your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore.

So in the last two verses you get “preserved” three times! And then, it gets to the point where it is brought up to such a pitch that He is preserving us eternally! It is not just that He is preserving us from one trial or for a short period of time, but rather by the time that you are getting to the end of the Psalm, He is telling us that He is going to preserve us always.

So you can see how this step-up idea goes through this Psalm.

It is really neat to think about it in this way, as a kind of pattern of statement and then either repetition through restatement or expansion as it goes through, until it reaches a conclusion.

But this failed. Like all other theories, it failed because it is not consistent throughout these Psalms. I just showed you the one here in Psalm 121. It was the most easily seen; the most obvious. And even in this one we looked at was a bit sketchy in a place or two, especially verses 5 and 6. It is a neat theory, but it has its shortcomings.

The fifth idea that has been put forward is that these Psalms of Ascents were sung as the Jews were returning from exile in Babylon. This idea is one that is really pushed by the modern critical scholars. And their reason is because they think that the Bible, the

Old Testament in particular, was written very late, such as from the last kings up through Ezra and Nehemiah. And so, they think that they were obviously songs that may have been written in Babylon or something similar, and that they sang them as they came back.

Well, this speculation falls flat because few of the songs actually fit the circumstances of a return from exile in Babylon. They may fit the idea of going somewhere, going up, but they do not necessarily fit the idea of coming back from exile. There are some suggestions of that in here, but not really.

So finally, we get to the one that is most generally accepted. The most widely accepted view is that they are pilgrim songs or psalms—pilgrimage psalms. The Israelites sang these songs as they journeyed **up** to Jerusalem for the three great feast (seasons) of the year. Remember, that is what they were told to do—they were to go up to Jerusalem three times a year at the times of the Days of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

Turn to Deuteronomy 16 where we go often on the holy days. I just want to show this one, because it repeats what is said earlier in the law. If you want to, you can also mark down Exodus 23:14-27, and Exodus 34:22-24. But, this one in Deuteronomy 16 says it more succinctly:

Deuteronomy 16:16 "Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LOORD 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 LOORD empty-handed.

So, we understand that they were supposed to go to Jerusalem (ultimately) because that is the place where He put His name. And, He had David bring the tabernacle to Jerusalem, and later Solomon built the temple. And from then on, everyone came up to Jerusalem for the feasts—well, those who were keeping the feasts—God was hoping that more people would; and during the times of the good kings, this appears to have happened. So, they would travel from wherever they lived in the land of Israel up to Jerusalem.

From most places in Israel it was a matter of going up to Jerusalem, because Jerusalem is up quite high, maybe a mile or so. And so you came up from the low lands to get to Jerusalem.

This particular idea that they are pilgrimage songs that were sung while going up to Jerusalem has far better support biblically than any other ideas, and far wider application to us, specifically, because it can also be used as songs for us in our walk up to the Kingdom of God.

Some of have seen that this is especially appropriate for the Feast of Tabernacles season, not necessarily to these other feasts, but particularly to the Feast of Tabernacles and the fall festivals in general. They have actually seen that each one of the songs of Ascents can be sung on each of the first 15 days of the seventh month, Tishri; that they seem to match well with the calendar.

Psalm 120, the first Psalm of Ascents would be sung on Tishri 1, which is the feast of Trumpets. And the Feast of Trumpets is all about God's return, the war that He makes; the stress that is upon the people, and that is what Psalm 120 is all about—a people in distress and needing help.

Psalm 129, which would be the tenth in this series, would be sung on Tishri 10, which is the Day of Atonement. And, Psalm 129 is about being afflicted, and God providing deliverance. So, here again is a match. As a matter of fact, Psalm 129 starts with, "Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth..." So, the idea of the whole Psalm is talking about the fact that he has suffered great affliction.

And then Psalm 133, which would be the 14th song of Ascents, there is no holy day at this point, but it is the day before the Feast of Tabernacles. Of course, Psalm 133 is, "How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell in unity." Well, that is the perfect Psalm for the 14th day of Tishri, because when do we get to the Feast of Tabernacles? Usually on the 14th day of Tishri! It is the day before the Feast of Tabernacles, when we are all gathered as one to worship God in unity.

And then, Psalm 134, which is the 15th song of Ascents, parallels the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles, and you can see that it is a welcoming Psalm for the people of God at His tabernacle.

It is very interesting. I do not know how much credence to give to it, but I wanted to pass it along, because it is neat to see that it could be very much like this.

It would work in a similar way, not perfectly, but in a similar way to feast season in Nisan, or Abib, because you start with the first day of the sacred year, and then the 10th day you have the separating and choosing of the lambs; and then the 14th day is the Passover, with everybody doing the same thing before God; and then you have the first

Days of Unleavened Bread, and another welcoming occasion at God's tabernacle. So, it would work for the spring holy days as well.

Now, before we go any further with this idea of the pilgrimage theme, I want to take a few moments to go into the organization of the 15 Psalms of Ascents, because there is some internal organization beyond the fact that they are all Psalms of Ascents. I think it is fascinating to see this internal order because it shouts the inspiration of God!

Now, 15 is an odd number. You cannot divide it equally in half. So, the Psalms cannot be divided neatly in that fashion. However, there is, when looked at closely enough, a 7:1:7 pattern or division that is readily apparent when we look at the superscriptions again.

Psalm 127 would be the middle psalm. There are seven psalms before it and seven psalms after it. This particular psalm is the one thought to have been written by Solomon. He is kind of the odd-man out.

David, we know, wrote four of these. And Hezekiah, evidently (or someone in his employ) wrote the other ten. So, there is a four, and a ten, which can be divided evenly; but one cannot be divided, so it stands alone.

Each group of seven psalms contains 5 anonymous psalms (maybe Hezekiah) and two by David. In the first group, David's psalms are the third in line (#122), and fifth in line (#124).

Now, it is interesting that in the second group, David's psalms are fourth in line (#131) and sixth in line (#133). Did you notice that there was an ascent? In the first group, he had numbers three and five. In the second group, he had numbers four and six. You see that even in the internal organization in the Psalms of Ascents, there is an ascent within the order. It is a nifty thing, and you can see it.

And there is more.

The seven/one/seven pattern is also intriguing because of its equal number usages of the name of God—the tetragrammaton—JHVH (LOORD)—the sacred name of God. JHVH is used 24 times in the first seven psalms; it is used three times in the central psalm by Solomon; and it is used 24 times (again) in the last seven psalms. That makes it 24/3/24. What is interesting about this is that in the third psalm of each section, Psalm 122, and Psalm 130, the name JA appears. Not Jaweh, but just JA. So, we have 51 occurrences of the name Jaweh, and two of JA. Again, JA appears in the third psalm of

each section.

So, we can see that it is equally divided among these 15 psalms. When you can see God's name in something, His inspiration is there!

Now, there is also another way of dividing or organizing these 15 psalms, because, obviously, 15 is divisible by either 3 and 5. So, there could be five groups of three, or three groups of five. And, believe it or not, there is!

The number 3 denotes completion. So, when you have three of something, it tends to be a complete group. The number five, as I mentioned in a sermon not too long ago, denotes divine grace. And so, if you put those two explanations together from three and five, you have complete, divine grace.

This leads into our overall theme of the pilgrimage of God's people. This pilgrimage in ancient Israel was the people going up to Jerusalem for the feast. But for us, the pilgrimage is our entire lives. And, our final destination is dwelling in the house of the Lord forever, as told in Psalm 123.

The idea, then, in these Psalms of Ascents is that if we finish our pilgrimage, if we go through all five of the set of three, or all three of the set of five, whichever way you wish—if we finish our pilgrimage going all the way to the end, if our walk finishes our ascent and reaches our destination—the Kingdom of God—we will find complete, divine grace. We will be living in the house of the Lord.

Now, I prefer the organization of five groups of three. That means that we have to separate these things. And the reason is that there are three themes that run through these psalms. So we have five groups that consist of these three themes one right after another. And this is really neat! It is amazing to look at!

The first group of three—120, 121, and 122—the second group is 123, 124, and 125, etc. So they are all there together.

What is interesting to me is that the first psalm in each one of these groups—120, 123, 126, 129, and 132—has the theme of distress, or tribulation, or trial, or some problem that needs to be solved.

The second psalm in each group—121, 124, 127, 130, and 133—has the theme of trust in God.

And then the third psalm in each group—122, 125, 128, 131, and 134—are psalms of praise, because of God's blessing and peace that He has brought to either Jerusalem, Zion, or God's House. The over-arching idea in the last group is that the individual has come near to God, and is in God's presence. Therefore he has peace and is blessed. He is with God and all is well.

Now, what we are going to do in the time remaining is we are going to go through one of these groups to show you these themes as the pop out of these scriptures. It is just amazing!

I have chosen the second group. I could have chosen any group, but I thought that the second group was a group we might not know as well. They are not one of those famous groups of psalms that we go to. This group is Psalm 123, 124, and 125. So, we will learn a little bit about these psalms, and then by this means, learn more about all of the Psalms of Ascents.

I do not intend to go through any more than just this group, today, though I will touch on one other psalm. But, I hope you will take what we have gone over today and apply them to the remaining four groups and maybe be able to lift some good information and help for you from them.

Remember that this should also coincide that Psalms Book Five is all about being uplifted and praises to God. So even though there are certain psalms in here that talk about trial and distress, if you go through them in these groupings, you find that by the end of it, you are feeling great, because God has come through. Even though the distress has been there, we have grown in faith, we are trusting in God, and God makes all things right in the end.

So, even though there may be certain psalms in the fifth book that seem like a downer, in this particular group of the Psalms of Ascents, they are not to be taken alone. They are best taken as groups.

Lucky for me, these are all short psalms!

Psalm 123:1-4 Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens. Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LOORD our God, until He has mercy on us. Have mercy on us, O LOORD, have mercy on us! For we are exceedingly filled with contempt. Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorn of those who are at ease, with the contempt of the proud.

Remember that the theme of the first psalm in any of these groups is distress, or trial, or tribulation, or some problem that needs to be addressed.

It is interesting to note that this particular psalm begins with the idea of looking up. What are we talking about here? These are the Psalms of Ascents. And these begin with the idea of looking up. If one were on a journey on an ascent somewhere, in order to look at the goal, a person would have to lift up his eyes to the destination. Here, as he begins a new group, the psalmist states plainly that the goal is not a mountain, it is not a city on a hill, even though it may have been Jerusalem at the time, the psalmist is telling us that the real goal is God Himself. That is what he lifts up his eyes to. That is what he is ascending toward. It is God—the true pilgrimage of life is toward God—moving toward Him—moving up to Him—improving toward Him—growing into His image. All of these ideas are of maturity and upward mobility—going somewhere from a low state to a higher state.

So, as we know, our journey is to become like Him, to be with Him for all eternity; to be in Him, to be part of His family. And so, the psalmist in his prayer to God lets Him know that he is focused on God for everything, and in everything that he does. So, he immediately gets this group off to a great start by saying, “I lift my eyes to You. This is my goal. This is what I am focused on. This is where I am going.”

And you know, in the New Testament we have a similar encouragement by the apostle Paul in Hebrews 12. We are told that this is to be our constant attitude and approach to life. This is after talking about the heroes of faith. Remember, we are moving toward trusting in God, so here in the New Testament, Paul seems to approach it backwards, but it is the same idea, here:

Hebrews 12:1-3 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race [similar to the upward climb] that is set before us [the process of growth we all go through], looking unto Jesus [at the goal-line], the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

So, this is exactly the same sort of thing that the psalmist is telling us. The psalmist

says, “I am looking to God. I have got my eyes focused on Him like a servant is focused on his master. I am focused on Him,” like jelly on bread, or whatever, because that is the way that the problems are going to be solved. That is what Paul says here. Consider Jesus—He endured hostility from sinners. If we keep our eyes on Him, endure the things that He endured, and do the things that He did, then we are going to have the same results. We are going to be like Him and will be in His kingdom. We will be with Him for all eternity.

So, we see back here in Psalm 123 that it is very similar to what we are going through in our own pilgrimage. And it should give us some reason to pause and think about these things.

Notice as we go through the psalm that he immediately brings out that we are not alone in this pilgrimage. Notice that he starts out, “Unto You I lift up my eyes.” But then, as you get to the middle of verse 2, he says, “So our eyes look to the Lord our God.” You need to remember that we are not the only one on this road. There are others alongside us on the same pilgrimage. And their eyes are focused on the same goal. They are God’s servants just like we are God’s servants. They are God’s children just like we are God’s children. They both have heard the same call, they have both been told to go to the same place, so, they are on the road together. They are headed out for God’s kingdom so that they can live with God for all eternity together.

So, we are aware here that not only are we on the road as individuals, but we are also on the road together with others in the Churches of God. So we have our own personal walk with God, but we also have a corporate walk alongside those others God has called into the church.

So, we are together to help one another; if we all have our eyes on the same goal, and we are all trying to reach the same conclusion in life, then we should work together to solve these problems.

Philippians 1:27-28 Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, **with one mind striving together** for the faith of the gospel, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God.

So, here we are again, together, we have been called together in this walk, and we are under attack. But, if we keep our eyes on Christ, go toward the goal, and help each

other, we will all make it.

Then as we continue through this psalm, he prays for mercy, because he and those that are with him are under great contempt and scorn—under persecution at this point. And so, they ask for God's mercy. Really, they are asking for His grace. There is no indication, here, that they are trying to justify themselves in any way. There is nothing that says, here, "Look, we have been keeping your commandments, we are good people, why are we having all these troubles?" No, they simply say, "God have mercy on us; we are in this trouble and under this persecution. We need Your help."

They do this because there is nowhere else to turn. He is their Savior and Redeemer. He is the only One who can help them in this fix that they are in; and so, they ask Him to grant them favor to overcome whatever this trial is.

I would also like to go to Hebrews 4 where it says:

Hebrews 4:16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

That is exactly what we do. Psalm 123 is a mirror image of what we are going through as we walk our Christian life and how we need to react to it—to beseech God for help as we need it with our eyes fixed firmly on Him as the goal.

Psalm 124:1-8 "If it had not been the LOORD who was on our side," Let Israel now say—"If it had not been the LOORD who was on our side, when men rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us alive, when their wrath was kindled against us; then the waters would have overwhelmed us, the stream would have gone over our soul; then the swollen waters would have gone over our soul." Blessed be the LOORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the LOORD, who made heaven and earth.

The second theme in each group is "Trust in God." And, we see that very plainly coming out here. In fact, it almost seems like a direct answer to what was asked for in Psalm 123. They seem to go together as partners. And they do! They called out to God for mercy in Psalm 123, and "The Lord," it says, "was on their side, and delivered them from their enemies." And if God had not intervened, no one would have saved them;

without God, they were without hope of deliverance. But God made the difference in their lives. He was the One, the one constant that they could rely on to get them out of their mess.

I would have gone through the enemy here, but I am running out of time. But there are six descriptions of the enemy, and whether you apply it to people or to Satan the Devil, it is really quite descriptive because the enemy is described as powerful, vicious, and overwhelming. It is beyond our ability to handle.

The six images are found in verses 3 through 7: (1) A beast swallowing its prey alive; (2) a flood submerging its victims; (3) a stream or torrent rushing over everything in its path; (4) raging waters sweeping everything before it (not just rushing over it, but sweeping it out of the way); (5) a predator grinding its victim in its teeth; (6) a fowler entrapping birds.

But it does not matter; whatever trouble that we are in, however strong and cruel the enemy, God is on our side to save us. Therefore, we can trust in Him, because, just as it says in the last line, He is the Creator God who made the heavens and the earth. Nothing is stronger than He is! We can have that same confidence. Jot down for your notes II Thessalonians 1:3-8 where Paul commends the Thessalonians for their trust in God, and that they would see that their enemies who had been persecuting them would be dealt with by God. But if not now, when Christ returns. That is basically that section in II Thessalonians 1:3-8.

Turn to Psalm 125 and it will pick up right where the last one left off. It goes into the theme, which is that God is with us, and so we have peace and safety.

Psalm 125:1-5 Those who trust in the **LOORD** are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the **LOORD** surrounds His people from this time forth and forever. For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous reach out their hands to iniquity. Do good, O **LOORD**, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts. As for such as turn aside to their crooked ways, the **LOORD** shall lead them away with the workers of iniquity. Peace be upon Israel!

So, at the end of 124, which said that they were going to trust God, because He is the Creator of everything, and He is their strength and Savior, we now have Psalm 125 and the fact that these people trust the Lord, and so He is going to surround them and

protect them, giving them the things that they need.

What he is saying here is that the Lord is there! They have reached the place that they need to be, and He is going to surround them with His arms, and take care of them, even in the midst of all this trial. Notice the workers of iniquity are not gone. But the people have the assurance that because God is with them, protecting them, and helping them in their need, He will not allow wickedness to hold sway for very long. He will not allow His people to get into iniquity by that means. He will not let the people of wickedness have too much influence. He is going to just sweep them aside in due time. So, be patient and wait. He is going to bless His people for their faithfulness and their uprightness in their hearts. He is there now and will be there for all eternity.

So, this fits the pattern of the themes, and we find blessing and peace while being in the presence of God.

And so the psalm ends with, "Peace be upon Israel." Another way to say that is, "All is well." God is there. God is in control. We can have peace, tranquility, even if only in our minds, while all hell breaks loose around us, because we know that God is completely sovereign, and He is always on the ball.

These are some of the final words of Paul that he gave the Philippians who had a wonderful relationship with him, and so he is leaving them with some wisdom:

Philippians 4:4-7 Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

In a way, this sums up what we just went through in that particular grouping of the Psalms of Ascents.

I want to conclude with the last of the Psalms of Ascents so that we can see where God wants us to wind up on this pilgrimage. Please turn to Psalm 134. This is where God wants us to end:

Psalm 134:1-3 Behold, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD, who by night stand in the house of the LORD! Lift up your hands in the sanctuary [still

Psalms of Ascents by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

the idea of lifting, of going up], and bless the LOORD. The LOORD who made heaven and earth Bless you from Zion!

The lesson, I think, is clear: What God wants us to see in these Psalms of Ascents is that it all ends in the glory of God. What God is working out in bringing many sons to glory (as He says in Hebrews 2:10) ultimately brings endless glory to Him as the Great God and Creator and Father of all. And what is interesting is that at the end in verse 3 is that everything is giving Him glory, He says that His glorification returns to us in great blessing, because we are His sons and daughters.