

No one is sure what the fifteen psalms that include in their title—a *"psalm of ascent"* or *"steps"*—is meant to convey. Ascent to *what*? Steps toward *what*?

Some point to the book of Ezekiel where it says that there were fifteen steps up to the altar in the Temple of Jerusalem. Maybe each of these psalms were sung as one made one's way up to the altar?

Another theory is that the word translated as *"ascent"* or *"steps"* is the same word that the book of Ezra uses to describe the journey from Babylon back home to Jerusalem.

Maybe the *"ascent"* or *"steps"* taken by these psalms is the ascent from exile and slavery to freedom and homecoming?

I like that! But I also like this. By the time of Jesus, Jews like Philo of Alexandria were saying that the *"ascent"* described in these fifteen psalms is the *ascent* or lifting up of the individual soul to God.

Out of all 150 psalms, God has singled these fifteen out, to give us a clear path—the *steps* of our journey—toward our rightful place in—and with—God.

For this study, we will go through Psalms 120-134 and there will be reflection as well as discussion questions!

A SONG OF ASCENTS – PSALM 120

120 In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me.

² Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.

³ What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?

⁴ A warrior's sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree!

⁵ Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!

⁶ Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.

⁷ I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war!

Dig Deeper

- 1) The tongue can get us into trouble? Has this been true in your life?
- 2) Look at James 3:1-12. How does the passage connect to this Psalm?
- 3) This author seemed to have traveled far (verse. 5) under threat or war. What challenges do you think people in his position face?
- 4) Why do you think there is so much war imagery when the psalmist claims to want peace?

The tongue is a powerful tool of peace or war. We can use it to call on God for help, but we might be surrounded by others who use the tongue for deceit. God warns us of His approaching judgement on lying lips that are eager for war. However, He also invites us to call on Him for peace and salvation.

O Lord, answer us with Your sure Word and rescue us by its power. Amen!



A SONG OF ASCENTS – PSALM 121

- 1** I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?
2 My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
4 Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
5 The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand.
6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
7 The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
8 The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.

Dig Deeper

- 1) Looking to the hills is likely an expression that the journey is almost over. When you finally arrive at a destination, what are some of the first things you do?
- 2) Look at Philippians 3:20-21. How does the passage connect to this Psalm?
- 3) This author extols how God is always there, even on a long journey. Has that been something you can resonate with for your entire life? Or just parts?
- 4) What does it mean for God to be a “keeper”?

We are pilgrims on a journey to our heavenly home. This Psalm reminds us to focus on the Lord, who oversees our journey. Do not allow the mountains, moon, sun or anything else in creation frighten you. Our God is eternally alert and goes above and before us.

O Lord, we trust in Your vigilant love. You will preserve us in order to bring us home.
Amen!


A SONG OF ASCENTS. OF DAVID – PSALM 122

122 I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"
2 Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!
3 Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together,
4 to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
5 There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.
6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! "May they be secure who love you!
7 Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!"
8 For my brothers and companions' sake I will say, "Peace be within you!"
9 For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

Dig Deeper

- 1) This Psalm is specifically attributed to David. This is likely the tabernacle and has specific significance. What is the big deal?
- 2) Look at 2 Samuel 6:12-15. How does the passage connect to this Psalm?
- 3) The idea that the "tribes go up" was actually commanded by God to happen three times a year (Exodus 23:17). Why is it good to get together regularly?
- 4) Brothers and companions are prominent in verse 8. How does faith relate to our family and friends?

Like David, we are welcomed into the Lord's house and can rejoice at the invitation. We are drawn to a heavenly Jerusalem. At the throne of Christ, the eternal Son of David, we find a place of peace. May God give us a place among all His people who walk by faith in Christ. Amen!



A SONG OF ASCENTS – PSALM 123

123 To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

2 Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us.

3 Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough
of contempt.

4 Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.

Dig Deeper

- 1) This Psalm lacks some of the travel imagery but emphasizes the servant nature of walking with God. In what ways do you serve God?
- 2) There is a wonderful connection of eyes to hands in this Psalm, both for the good (blessing) as well as the direction (action). How does looking to God inform your actions?
- 3) Look at Luke 18:1-8. How does the passage connect to this Psalm?
- 4) This psalmist is tired. Others mock him for his devotion to God. How do you respond to those who do the same to you?

Our eyes are to be upon God both to receive His blessings and to do His bidding. We are servants of a merciful Lord. However, when our time of service is filled with contempt from others, we grow tired of waiting for God's justice. The Lord does indeed have mercy for us in Christ Jesus.

I do not despair, O Lord, but pray to the One who sees my service and my enemies. Say Your reward and Your justice come. Amen!

A SONG OF ASCENTS. OF DAVID – PSALM 124


124 If it had not been the Lord who was on our side— let Israel now say—
2 if it had not been the Lord who was on our side when people rose up against us,
3 then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us;
4 then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us;
5 then over us would have gone the raging waters.
6 Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth!
7 We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken, and we have escaped!
8 Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Dig Deeper

- 1) This Psalm connects to David and his struggles with King Saul and also the Philistines. What battles have you survived in God's strength?
- 2) Verses 1-5 are all about the threat and verses 6-7 is the escape! In what ways has God delivered you from troubles?
- 3) Look at Psalm 91. How does the passage connect to this Psalm?
- 4) The Psalm concludes with the truth that God is the one who gains the victory. It recalls that He is the creator. Why is that so important?

We need this Psalm's reminder that our strength and safety come only by God's hand. We are in danger from flood and snare, the overwhelming and the enticing. But God is faithful for His Name's sake. He rescues us so that we will continue to bless and call on His name.

Lead us safely, Lord, so we may always give glory to Your name. Amen!



A SONG OF ASCENTS – PSALM 125

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

2 As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.

3 For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong.

4 Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts!

5 But those who turn aside to their crooked ways the Lord will lead away with evildoers!
Peace be upon Israel!

Dig Deeper

- 1) The emphasis here is on security. Why might that be important for a traveler?
- 2) Look at Psalm 46. How does the passage connect to this Psalm?
- 3) We can relate to mountains! You can often see for miles in any direction on top of a mountain. How might that be helpful in this Psalm?
- 4) The Psalm ends with a blessing and a curse. Why do we see that dynamic so often in the Psalms and other books of the Bible?

God's blessing transforms us into mountains surrounding His dwelling place. We are built on His Word as an unchanging rock, and we become pillars by His grace.

Make us upright in heart, O Lord, that we might be preserved before You. Amen!



A SONG OF ASCENTS – PSALM 126

126 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."

3 The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.

4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negeb!

5 Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!

6 He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

Dig Deeper

- 1) There is powerful imagery about celebration. What are some of the most memorable celebrations you have been part of?
- 2) This Psalm is likely written after the captives returned home from the Babylonian exile; what range of emotions do you think are expressed here?
- 3) Look at Isaiah 41:17-20. How does the passage connect to this Psalm?
- 4) The streams or rivers of the Negeb were prone to flash flooding, so dry creek beds would instantly get filled. How does God sometimes come unexpectedly?

May God give us the expectation that times of sudden refreshing will come from Him. Perhaps now you are in a time of sowing with bitter tears; do not despair of His grace. Trust in His power to do the unimaginable through overflowing kindness.

By faith we rejoice, O Lord, in the sowing of Jesus' body on Good Friday and the harvest of blessings He prepared on Eastern morn. Amen!

A SONG OF ASCENTS. OF SOLOMON – PSALM 127

127 Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

²It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.

³Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward.

⁴Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth.

⁵Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!

He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Dig Deeper

- 1) This Psalm is attributed to Solomon. He was considered a master builder in Israel. What does this Psalm have to say about our own home? Church?
- 2) Look at Matthew 7:24-27. How does the passage connect to this Psalm?
- 3) Children are mentioned prominently as a blessing (verses 3-5). How is that true? Can this be pushed too far?
- 4) "Eating the bread of anxious toil". That is an amazing statement. What does it mean?

Our houses and our families within them are God's gifts. However, our walls are fragile and our rooms are empty without His blessing. The Lord leads us to value His gifts and commit them to His watchful care. He will preserve us unto life everlasting.

Fill our homes with devout children, pour heritage from You. Give us this faith and help us build our homes and families on the security of Your word. Amen!

A SONG OF ASCENTS – PSALM 128

128 Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways!

2 You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.

3 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots around your table.

4 Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.

5 The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life!

6 May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!

Dig Deeper

- 1) This is a full-blown pilgrim song! When you find yourself on a long trip, is there a bit of a soundtrack? What were some of the hits?
- 2) There is a powerful blend of house and family expressed as prosperity. Why is that so true, even all these years later?
- 3) Look at Proverbs 17:1-6 How does the passage connect to this Psalm?
- 4) Blessing and peace are closely associated in this Psalm. Why do we have these at some times but not others?

May God grant us the blessings of a life lived under the fear and respect of God. May we see our families as the kindness of God. In our relationships with our children and our grandchildren, God shows His power and mercy.

O Lord, open our eyes to appreciate Your gifts and praise You for their riches. Amen!



A SONG OF ASCENTS – PSALM 129

- 129** "Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth" – let Israel now say –
2 "Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me.
3 The plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their furrows."
4 The Lord is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked.
5 May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward!
6 Let them be like the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up,
7 with which the reaper does not fill his hand nor the binder of sheaves his arms,
8 nor do those who pass by say, "The blessing of the Lord be upon you!
We bless you in the name of the Lord!"

Dig Deeper

- 1) This Psalm is a vivid reminder that we can experience difficulty. Have you experienced this kind of pain? How have you stood?
- 2) Verse three is graphic and points to Christ's scourging before His crucifixion. How has Christ brought you comfort even in your tough times?
- 3) Look at Isaiah 40:6-8. How does it connect to this Psalm?
- 4) The Psalm ends in a mutual blessing. What types of goodbyes are easy? Hard?

We may feel some part of the afflictions of this Psalm. Yet, the afflictions shall not prevail! The blessings of the Lord are with us through Christ.

Lord, show Your power and justice over our enemies. Lead us to call on Your name and receive the blessings that come from You. Amen!



A SONG OF ASCENTS – PSALM 130

130 Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!

2 O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

3 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

4 But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.

5 I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word, I hope;

6 my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.

7 O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.

8 And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

Dig Deeper

- 1) This is one of seven penitential Psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 143). When asked, Martin Luther said this Psalm is one of the very best. What is so powerful in this Psalm?
- 2) Being in the depths (feeling down, feeling low) is part of our human existence. What helps you to get out of those valleys?
- 3) Forgiveness is the absolute expression of mercy that God gives to us. How does forgiveness look in your life? Is it easy to give or receive?
- 4) Look at Romans 2:1-11. How does the passage connect to this Psalm?

The psalmist is in a state of emotional desolation, overwhelmed with misery and guilt. Yet, as he realizes God hears his pleas and grants him full forgiveness, his darkness slowly gives way to light and the hope of redemption.

O Lord, in our happy times we often forget You, but in our suffering, we turn to You, O Lord. And in our weakness, we find Your strength. Speak to us the word of Your promise. Amen!

A SONG OF ASCENTS. OF DAVID – PSALM 131

131 O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

2 But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

3 O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.

Dig Deeper

- 1) This Psalm marks David's triumphant entry with the ark of the covenant. It doesn't exalt David, but rather God. How can you give credit to God instead of yourself?
- 2) Some think that faith is a matter of age, intellect, or maturity. How does this Psalm speak against that notion?
- 3) Look at Luke 18:17. How does the passage connect to this Psalm?
- 4) Jesus often speaks about children and their faith as the pinnacle of the walk with Him. What does that mean?

Before God and the mysteries of existence, we are like little children. And like little children, we can find solace in God's love for us in Jesus Christ, who likewise became a little child on our behalf. While some believe that a child cannot have faith, Christ points to children as models of faith.

Give us the faith of children O Lord, calm us and quiet us by Your presence in Word and Sacrament. In the name of the Christ Child. Amen!



A SONG OF ASCENTS – PSALM 132

132 Remember, O Lord, in David's favor, all the hardships he endured,
2 how he swore to the Lord and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob,
3 "I will not enter my house or get into my bed,
4 I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids,
5 until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob."
6 Behold, we heard of it in Ephrathah; we found it in the fields of Jaar.
7 "Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool!"
8 Arise, O Lord, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might.
9 Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your saints shout for joy.
10 For the sake of your servant David, do not turn away the face of your anointed one.
11 The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back:
"One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne.
12 If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies that I shall teach them,
their sons also forever shall sit on your throne."
13 For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place:
14 "This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it.
15 I will abundantly bless her provisions; I will satisfy her poor with bread.
16 Her priests I will clothe with salvation, and her saints will shout for joy.
17 There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed.
18 His enemies I will clothe with shame, but on him his crown will shine."

Dig Deeper

- 1) David did not build the temple, his son Solomon did. It is a Psalm of place, of belonging. How do you have a place with God? How do you belong to Him?
- 2) Look at 2 Samuel 6 and 7. How does the passage connect to this Psalm?
- 3) Ephrathah is Bethlehem where both David and Jesus were born. What does this Psalm have to say about the incarnation (Jesus living among us)?
- 4) God will abundantly provide for the needs of His people. How is this true in your life?

One of David's sons, the Anointed One, will be enthroned forever. He will clothe His people with righteousness and salvation. This Psalm curses the enemies of God's Anointed. O Lord, we praise You for dwelling with us. Clothe us with the righteousness and salvation of Your Anointed One, Jesus Christ our King. In His name, amen!

A SONG OF ASCENTS. OF DAVID – PSALM 133

133 Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!

²It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!

³It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

Dig Deeper

- 1) When was the last time you participated in a family reunion? What is great about those events? Not so great?
- 2) Oil in this context both acts as a lotion for the skin and a lice repellent for hair, but it also represents blessing and abundance. How does oil connect to our modern-day life?
- 3) Look at Psalm 23. How does the passage connect to this Psalm?
- 4) Mount Hermon is mentioned, but it is on another mount (Mount Calvary) that we receive blessing a life forevermore. How does the joy of salvation connect to the idea of a family reunion in heaven?

Living in unity is as soothing as being anointed with oil, as refreshing as dew from the mountains on a parched desert. Descriptions of the goodness and pleasure of unity and brotherhood remind us that we often experience discord, strife, and disunity instead.

We praise You, O Lord, for the unity we have through You with all our fellow Christians.
Amen!

A SONG OF ASCENTS – PSALM 134

134 Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord!

²Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord!

³May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!

Dig Deeper

- 1) Our final Psalm is closely tied to priests in the temple and the changing of the watch. How do you bless the Lord?
- 2) The lifting of hands is prominent throughout the scriptures. Is posture in worship important? Why or why not?
- 3) Look at Numbers 6:24. How does it connect to this Psalm?
- 4) The “You” in verse 3 is singular. What significance does that have?

The priests on duty at the temple during the night are urged to bless the Lord, and yet the Lord blesses us. The night is an emblem of darkness and sorrow. Yet Christ is present in the darkness. He gives us His blessing from the sacrificial mountain in Jerusalem by the continual ministry of the Church through Word and sacrament.

We bless You O Lord even in the darkness. And You bless us through Your Son, who went into the darkness of death to bring us into His light. Amen!

