

# Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

Bereans Sunday School  
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by  
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The Psalms of Ascents — A Journey of Faith

## 1.0 Introducing the Psalms of Ascents (Psalms 120–134)

- “One aspect of *world* that I have been able to identify as harmful to Christians is the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. We assume that if something can be done at all, it can be done quickly and efficiently. Our attention spans have been conditioned by thirty-second commercials. Our sense of reality has been flattened by thirty-page abridgements.

“It is not difficult in such a world to get a person interested in the message of the gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest. Millions of people in our culture make decisions for Christ, but there is a dreadful attrition rate. Many claim to have been born again, but the evidence for mature Christian discipleship is slim. In our kind of culture anything, even news about God, can be sold if it is packaged freshly; but when it loses its novelty, it goes on the garbage heap. There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.

“Religion in our time has been captured by the tourist mindset. Religion is understood as a visit to an attractive site to be made when we have adequate leisure. For some it is a weekly jaunt to church. For others, occasional visits to special services. Some, with a bent for religious entertainment and sacred diversion, plan their lives around special events like retreats, rallies and conferences. We go to see a new personality, to hear a new truth, to get a new experience and so, somehow, expand our otherwise humdrum lives. . . . We’ll try anything—until something else comes along.” — Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 11–12.

- Identify some experiences or areas of life that require a significant investment of time in order to bring them to fruition and/or full appreciation.  
✓  
✓  
✓

## 2.0 Reading Psalms 120-121 (NAU)



**120:1** A Song of Ascents.

In my trouble I cried to the LORD,  
And He answered me.

**120:2** Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips,  
From a deceitful tongue.

**120:3** What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you,  
You deceitful tongue?

**120:4** Sharp arrows of the warrior,  
With the *burning* coals of the broom tree.

**120:5** Woe is me, for I sojourn in Meshech,  
For I  dwell  among the tents of Kedar!

**120:6** Too long has my soul had its dwelling  
With those who hate peace.

**120:7** I am *for peace*, but when I speak,  
They are for war.

**121:1** A Song of Ascents.

I will lift up my eyes to the mountains;  
From where shall my help come?

**121:2** My help comes from the LORD,  
Who made heaven and earth.

**121:3** He will not allow your foot to slip;  
He who keeps you will not slumber.

**121:4** Behold, He who keeps Israel  
Will neither slumber nor sleep.

**121:5** The LORD is your keeper;  
The LORD is your shade on your right hand.

**121:6** The sun will not smite you by day,  
Nor the moon by night.

**121:7** The LORD will protect you from all evil;  
He will keep your soul.

**121:8** The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in  
From this time forth and forever.

### 3.0 Understanding the Psalms of Ascents

#### Notes



- The psalm heading (“Song of ascents”) provides, at minimum, a glimpse at the ultimate use to which Israelite worship appointed the psalm.
  - Some interpreters, like Luther, believe that “ascents” refers to a higher key in which musicians were to play and sing them. Others refer to an increasing volume, starting softly and growing louder.
  - Lightfoot, Thirtle, Bullinger, Scroggie, and Phillips associate these psalms with the sun drawing back ten degrees on the sundial when God granted Hezekiah a 15-year extension of life (Isaiah 38).
    - ✓ “These fifteen ‘Songs of Degrees’ correspond to the number of years added to Hezekiah’s life. He himself wrote ten of them (corresponding to the number of degrees the shadow went back on the sundial); the other five were selected from extant hymns of David and Solomon and added to the collection. . . . A study of the incidents recorded by the Holy Spirit reveals many points of comparison (*The Companion Bible* lists fifteen) between Hezekiah’s experience and the theme of these songs.” — John Phillips, *Exploring Psalms: An Expository Commentary*, 2 vols., John Phillips Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1988), 2:428.
  - Within Psalms 120–134 some scholars identify a poetic steplike parallelism wherein a term in one line is echoed in the following line. They associate the psalms’ heading (“Song of Ascents”) with that phenomenon.
    - ✓ Some of these psalms lack this type of parallelism and it is found in psalms outside this collection of fifteen.
  - Other interpreters associate these psalms with the exiles’ return to Judah from Babylon (cf. Ezra 7:9, “For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon”).
    - ✓ However, some of the psalm headings themselves appear to discourage associating these songs solely with the return from Babylon (e.g., 122; 124; 127; 131; 133).
  - One scholar parallels these fifteen psalms with the fifteen Hebrew words of the Aaronic benediction in Numbers 6:24-26. He takes the Psalms of Ascents as an elaboration of the benediction’s key terms. According to Jewish tradition, worshippers would pronounce the Aaronic blessing on the steps of the Temple porch. Leon J. Liebreich, “The Songs of Ascents and Priestly Blessing,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74 (1955): 33–36.
    - ✓ The tradition is much later than the biblical psalms in this collection.



- In Jewish tradition Levites sang the fifteen songs of ascent on the fifteen steps leading from the Temple's Court of the Women to the Court of the Israelites.
  - ✓ The existence of the fifteen steps is hypothetical and unproven.
  - ✓ Although pilgrims may have employed these psalms while ascending to the Temple, some of the psalms obviously were not composed specifically for that purpose.
- Most commentators, however, are of the opinion that pilgrims to the annual festivals in Jerusalem sang these psalms as they ascended to Jerusalem and the Temple (cp. 2 Kgs 23:2; Neh 12:37; Pss 42:4; 122:1–2; 132:7).
  - ✓ The feasts of Passover (Unleavened Bread and barley harvest, 14 Nisan), Pentecost (Weeks/First Fruits and wheat harvest, 6 Sivan), and Booths (Ingathering and fruit harvest, 15 Tishri). See Exodus 23:14–17 and Deuteronomy 16:16. See, also, David G. Barker, “‘The Lord Watches over You’: A Pilgrimage Reading of Psalm 121,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152, no. 606 (April 1995): 164.
  - ✓ Michael Wilcock observes that the feast of Tabernacles in 445 BC, presided over by Ezra and Nehemiah, might provide an event significant to the Psalms of Ascents: “The incident of Nehemiah 13:15–22 could date from the three or four Sabbaths between the setting up of Jerusalem’s new gates (7:1–3; 13:19) and the beginning of Tabernacles. Both the people and their leaders were responsible for the sabbath-breaking that it describes. The whole community needed cleansing. But *full redemption* covers the unrighteousness of all, repeated backsliding, and every sin.” — Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 73–150*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 239.
- One-third of the Psalms of Ascents include a reference to authorship in their headings (David in 122, 124, 131, and 133; and Solomon in 127).
- Common elements shared by the Psalms of Ascents:
  - Brevity (except for Ps 132).
  - Preoccupation with Zion, Jerusalem, and the Temple.
  - Frequent references to Israel.
  - Focus on the topic of blessing (128:4, 5; 129:8; 132:15; 133:3; 134:3), peace (120:6, 7; 122:6–8; 125:5; 128:6), and good (122:9; 125:4; 128:5; 133:1).
- Organization of the Psalms of Ascents:
  - Wilcock believes that the songs form five sets of three psalms each focusing on a theme of *distress* in the first, *power* in the second, and *security* in the third (*The Message of Psalms 73–150*, 220).

- ✓ Phillips agrees in principle, indicating that the first in each triad deals with *trouble*, the second with *trust*, and the third with *triumph* (*Exploring Psalms*, 2:428).

	<b>I</b>	<b>II</b>	<b>III</b>	<b>IV</b>	<b>V</b>
<b><i>Trouble – Problem</i></b>	Psalm 120 Anonymous	Psalm 123 Anonymous	Psalm 126 Anonymous <b>Zion</b>	Psalm 129 Anonymous <u>Israel</u> <b>Zion</b> <b>Blessing</b>	Psalm 132 Anonymous <b>Zion</b> <b>Blessing</b>
<b><i>Trust – Power</i></b>	Psalm 121 Anonymous <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 124 <b>David</b> <u>Israel</u>	<b>Psalm 127</b> <b>Solomon</b> <b>Blessing</b>	Psalm 130 Anonymous <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 133 <b>David</b> <b>Zion</b> <b>Blessing</b>
<b><i>Triumph – Protection</i></b>	Psalm 122 <b>David</b> <u>Israel</u> Jerusalem “house of the LORD”	Psalm 125 Anonymous <u>Israel</u> Jerusalem <b>Zion</b>	Psalm 128 Anonymous <u>Israel</u> Jerusalem <b>Zion</b> <b>Blessing</b>	Psalm 131 <b>David</b> <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 134 Anonymous <b>Zion</b> “house of the LORD” <b>Blessing</b>

#### 4.0 Singing the Psalms of Ascents

##### “I Cried to God in My Distress”

(Tunes: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” or “Doxology”)

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| <p>1 I cried to God in my distress,<br/>And by the Lord my prayer was heard;<br/>O save me, Lord, from lying lips<br/>And from the false, deceitful word.</p> <p>3 Alas for me, whose lot is cast<br/>With those who find their joy in strife!<br/>With those who hate the paths of peace<br/>I long have dwelt and spent my life.</p> | <p>2 What woe for falsehood can atone,<br/>Or punish the deceitful tongue,<br/>The tongue whose speech consumes like fire,<br/>Whose words like deadly shafts are flung?</p> <p>4 In thought and act I am for peace,<br/>Peace I pursue and ever seek;<br/>But those about me are for strife,<br/>Though I in love and kindness speak.</p> |
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— Author unknown  
Paraphrase of Psalm 120

#### 5.0 Praying the Psalms of Ascents



- Lord, preserve me from those who attack me with their words. [120:2–3]
- Praise God, He is my Helper, my Deliverer, my Keeper, and my Guardian. [121]
- O Father, bring lasting peace to Jerusalem. [122:6]
- Give me Your grace, O Lord. [123:2–3]
- Praise God, He is our Helper. [124]

#### 6.0 Applying the Psalms of Ascents

- True worship and service require a lasting commitment to spiritual disciplines.
- Triumph over troubles comes when we trust God alone.