

## **Psalms of Ascent – “Songs for the Road”**

(Introduction modified and taken from Calvary Baptist Church of Santa Barbara, CA)

### **Pilgrims**

Pilgrimage. The word brings to mind many different images and for Americans we mostly think of pilgrims associated with a favorite holiday, Thanksgiving. Much of our country’s heritage comes from pilgrims who fled religious persecution in England and traveled to this land to establish a new home. Yet a pilgrimage holds a different connotation. For example, baseball fans make their pilgrimage to Cooperstown, NY where the baseball hall of fame is housed. Likewise, in every major religion, annual pilgrimages — trips to sacred places — are undertaken by the faithful: Muslims to Mecca, Jews (and many Christians) to Jerusalem, and Catholics to the Vatican in Rome.

Pilgrims are not nomads. Like pilgrims, nomads are on the move, carrying their homes with them, following their herds or pursuing new markets for their handiwork. But unlike pilgrims, nomads are simply wanderers with no final destination. Wherever they make camp is home for the time being. Pilgrims, on the other hand, have a destination in mind; their journey has a purpose. Pilgrims are restless to reach their journey’s end. They press on and don’t linger too long in any one place.

This summer we will be focusing on this theme of pilgrimage as we study the Psalms of Ascent. The image of a pilgrimage has often been used as a metaphor for the Christian life. As Christians, we recognize that we are on a pilgrimage. This world is not our true home and therefore we should never get too cozy here. *“For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”* (Hebrews 13:14) We are *“...looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”* (Hebrews 11:10)

Pilgrims bound for their destination, adding to their numbers as they go, often find that the journey itself is part of the experience. This is also true for Christians. We are learning and growing as we travel.

### **Songs of Ascents**

Our texts will come from a group of Psalms called the Songs of Ascents. These are songs that were used by Jewish pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem for the three annual festivals — Passover, Pentecost, and the Day of Atonement.

The title *Song of Ascents* is the Hebrew phrase *shir hama’aloth*. The first word, *shir*, means *hymn* or *song*. The second word, *ma’alah*, means both a *step* (or stair) and a *going up*. *Going up* is often used in the Bible to refer to going up to Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary would probably have sung these psalms as they went up to Jerusalem with the young Jesus. Jesus and His disciples would have sung them as they went up for the feasts. This reminds us that the life of the disciple ought to be one of ever increasing maturity. It ought to be an upward, Godward life, ever growing *“...in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”* (2 Peter 3:18)

The content and themes of the Songs of Ascents focused the pilgrims' minds on the purpose of their journey and prepared their hearts to worship God when they reached Jerusalem. In the same way, the themes of these songs for the road can help us on our pilgrimage. They can help us press on when we grow tired. They can inspire us when we are tempted or feel discouraged. Above all, they can keep us focused on the God who is at the heart of our true home and who is also with us on the journey.

## **Discipleship**

Eugene Peterson wrote a wonderful book based on the Psalms of Ascents entitled *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Peterson chose a particularly striking subtitle, *Discipleship in an Instant Society*. He points out that these psalms communicate a powerful message in our "instant society." He writes,

"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." (Eugene Peterson, pg.12)

The pilgrimage of the Christian is a pilgrimage of discipleship. As James Boice puts it, these are "discipleship songs." Disciples spend their lives as apprentices to their master. Christians spend their lives as apprentices to their master, Jesus Christ for the long-haul.

## **Tools**

As we study these psalms we will receive indispensable tools to help us in our pilgrimage of discipleship. Here are a few:

**Prayer.** The Psalms provide patterns for prayer. Eugene Peterson writes, "I knew that following Jesus could never develop into a 'long obedience' without a deepening life of prayer and that the Psalms had always been the primary means by which Christians learned to pray everything they lived, and live everything they prayed over the long haul." It is no wonder that the Psalms were considered Israel's prayer book. As we study these psalms, let us not forget to also pray them.

**Worship.** The Psalms also provide patterns for praise. They were Israel's hymn book. The title of the book of Psalms is taken from the Greek translation, *Psalmoi*. This comes from *psallo*, which means "to pluck," used first for the playing of a stringed instrument or even for the instrument itself. Later, the word was used to describe a song (*psalmos*) or a collection of songs (*psalterion*). The actual Hebrew title is *t<sup>e</sup>hillim* — "praises" or "songs of praise." As Tremper Longman writes, "The Psalms are a kind of literary sanctuary in the Scripture."

**Expression.** The Psalms reflect the emotional responses of believers as they encounter the mysteries of God’s ways. They give dynamic expression to deep faith. John Calvin likened the Psalms to a mirror of the soul:

“There is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.” (John Calvin)

**Poetry.** The Psalms (in general) are considered poetry. Poetry, while difficult, is a rich and textured way to communicate. In the Psalms we encounter:

- Parallelisms — Parallelisms refer to the way one phrase in the poem interacts with the phrase which follows it. For example: “*O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger*” is followed with, “*or discipline me in your wrath.*” (Psalm 38)
- Imagery — God is personified as a “*rock,*” (see Psalm 62) “*fortress,*” (see Psalm 62) “*shield,*” (see Psalm 28) and “*shepherd,*” (see Psalm 23) to name but a few of the images employed in the Psalms.
- Simile — Similes use images to paint a picture for the reader through comparison. “*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.*” (Psalm 42)
- Metaphor — A metaphor is similar to a simile, but more explicit and clear. “*To you I call, O Lord my Rock.*” (Psalm 28)

The language of poetry is not always as clear as literal language, but it nevertheless communicates in a way that normal prose cannot. It enables us to explore God’s nature and our relationship with Him in ways not otherwise available to us.

## **Relationship**

The Psalms are declarations of the relationship between God and His people. The psalmists cling to God’s covenant promises of provision, protection, and preservation. What we find in the Psalms is not a neat and tidy systematic theology, but rather theological reflections on the relationship of God to His people. As C.S. Lewis points out, “The Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons.”

Whether songs of adoration, confessions of sin, protests of innocence, complaints about sufferings, pleas for deliverance, assurances of being heard, petitions before battle, or thanksgivings afterwards, the Psalms are all expressions of the unique relationship between the one true God and His people.

As we read and study the Psalms of Ascents we will learn about both God and ourselves. Our emotions will be touched, our minds informed, and our wills moved. Over the next several weeks, may these Psalms penetrate our souls and make us fit for the journey.