

# Songs of Ascent Pt. 1

Pastor James Foley – Shared Sunday, July 12, 2020

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## INTRODUCTION

Thank you for joining us today. Whether you are here IN PERSON or watching via the LIVESTREAM, you are most WELCOME. Please have a Bible at the ready and be prepared to take some notes. Please turn to the Book of Psalms (cf. Psalm 120).

## SETTING THE STAGE

In recent months my messages have been rather TETHERED to the happenings within our nation (e.g., COVID-19, Civil Unrest, Culture Conflict, etc.). This has been both beneficial and necessary, as we must consider the circumstances of our generation through the LENS of Scripture.

**KEY** – However, I want to offer a NEW series that is a bit more transcendent in its import and application. Specifically, I want to offer a four-part series on what are commonly called the SONGS OF ASCENT. In this opening session, I will do my best to establish a suitable FOUNDATION for this multi-part teaching.

**FYI** – This opening installment may be SHORTER than my average sermon (i.e., seeking to simply “set the stage”). Like I was told by a professor in Bible School: “Son, no one will ever be angry if you preach too short.” Thus said, please give me the best 20–25 minutes of your attention. If I go too long, DISREGARD these statements!

## SONGS OF ASCENT PT. 1

I suppose the best place to start is at the very BEGINNING (as they say)! It is quite possible that you have NEVER heard of this phrase before (i.e., Songs of Ascent), so let us tackle the most foundational question that we can possibly ask...

### Q. What are the Songs of Ascent?

**A.** The Songs of Ascent are a special GROUPING or COLLECTION of psalms within the Book of Psalms (i.e., Psalms 120–134). In fact, take a moment to look at your Bible with me—both paper and digital. Do you see this unique subheading within each of these psalms? Consider that it has been placed there for a reason!

**FYI** – These psalms are also called PILGRIM Songs. We will address this term in greater detail in a few moments!

## SONGS OF ASCENT PT. 2

### Q. Who Wrote the Songs of Ascent?

**A.** Four of these songs are attributed to DAVID (cf. Psalm 122, 124, 131, 133) and one to SOLOMON (127)—both prolific writers and kings of Israel. The remaining ten were penned by ANONYMOUS authors. Their authorship has been lost to history it would seem.

**FYI** – The information provided thus far NATURALLY leads to a vital question...

## SONGS OF ASCENT PT. 3

### **Q. Why are these psalms called Songs of Ascent?**

**A.** We will need to UNDERSTAND a bit of history, culture and tradition to properly A this Q...

**NOTE 1** – The Jews were required to observe THREE annual holy days in the city of Jerusalem: **a)** Unleavened Bread; **b)** Weeks/Pentecost; and **c)** Tabernacles/Booths. Thus, faithful Jews would travel from all over the ancient world to WORSHIP the Lord at these appointed times. As they journeyed—i.e., made PILGRIMAGE—to Jerusalem, the people of God would SING these psalms in preparation for worship. Since this capital city is situated on a high hill (el. 2,700-ft.), these pilgrims would have to ASCEND or “GO UP TO” Jerusalem...

...Hence the name: “Songs of Ascent”

**NOTE 2** – Moreover, according to some TRADITIONS, the Jewish priests would sing these fifteen Songs of Ascent as they climbed fifteen steps to minister at the Temple in Jerusalem. Each step taken would lead to the singing of another psalm!

**KEY** – I need you to IMAGINE being a part of such a pilgrimage if you are to understand their power...

- You and your family set out from your home to travel to Jerusalem—singing these songs...
- Your family meets up with other families (i.e., forming a caravan)—singing these songs...
- Your caravan meets up with other caravans along the journey—singing these songs...
- As you approach the city the roadways abound with people—singing these songs...
- Hundreds of thousands of people climb the hill to Jerusalem—singing these songs...
- At the convocation, the priests (and the people) sing these songs—step by step by step...

**Q. Can you imagine what it would feel to be a part of something like this (i.e., colossal scale)?**

**Q. i.e., To be a part of such spiritual preparation, unified community and the worship of God?**

**FYI** – I can only imagine the TRANSFORMATIVE impact of such a God-centered (i.e., centric) moment!

## SONGS OF ASCENT PT. 4

**KEY** – The Songs of Ascent are WELL suited for this usage due to their poetic form/the sentiments they express.

### **1) They are Concise**

Take note that the psalms that comprise the Songs of Ascent are quite SHORT.

**Q. How short are they? (~6.7 verses)**

Psalm 120 – 7 verses	Psalm 125 – 5 verses	Psalm 130 – 8 verses
Psalm 121 – 8 verses	Psalm 126 – 6 verses	Psalm 131 – 3 verses
Psalm 122 – 9 verses	Psalm 127 – 5 verses	Psalm 132 – 18 verses
Psalm 123 – 4 verses	Psalm 128 – 6 verses	Psalm 133 – 3 verses
Psalm 124 – 8 verses	Psalm 129 – 8 verses	Psalm 134 – 3 verses

## 2) They are Repetitive

There is a wonderful sense of REPETITION amongst the Songs of Ascent (i.e., in terms of the words or phrases employed and the themes they touch upon). If you were an ancient Jew traveling from your home to the city of Jerusalem, the singing of these psalms would expose you to an ARRAY of oft-repeated themes (e.g., the nearness of God in times of distress; the favor of God; the sovereignty of God; man's need for God; the beauty of spiritual unity; etc.).

**Q. How many of you have heard me say that “repetition is the best teacher”?**

**NOTE** – These psalms abound in repetition—and WE do well to CONSIDER this reality!

## 3) They are Easy to Remember

Since they are both short and repetitive, they are quite easy to MEMORIZE (v. Psalm 119)! Moreover, since these songs were sung again and again by the ancient Jews year-in-and-year out, they would have become part of the spiritual fabric and/or DNA of the ancient people of Israel. These would have been THEIR songs—i.e., everyone would have known them by HEART!

**FYI** – They functioned as spiritual ANTHEMS celebrating the Lord and their relationship with Him!

**KEY** – This raises the FINAL Q that I want to contend with this morning. Consider the following...

## SONGS OF ASCENT PT. 5

**Q. What function do the Songs of Ascent play in the lives of NT believers across space and time?**

**KEY** – Let us be honest! We are FAR removed from the culture and practices of the ancient Jews. We do NOT celebrate their holy feasts and festivals. We BARELY want to read the Book that commands/details these appointed Feasts (i.e., Leviticus). We do NOT pilgrimage from our home to a spiritual capital on multiple occasions per year. Therefore...

**Q. Do the Songs of Ascent have any bearing on how we live in Century-21 and beyond?**

**A. YES!**

**NOTE** – With the time remaining I would like to consider the RATIONALE for this reply. REMEMBER...

**Romans 15:4a (NIV, Emphasis Mine)**

4 . . . **everything** that was written in the past was written to teach us . . .

**2 Timothy 3:16–17 (Emphasis Mine)**

16 **All** Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,  
17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

## APPLICATION #1

FIRSTLY, the Songs of Ascent illustrate how we can express our worship through the POWER of SONG. These psalms were set to music and were sung by the people (i.e., as were a great many of the psalms). This is MORE than Hebrew poetry!

**KEY** – There is a POWER in musicality AND there is a dimensionality to that power (vertically and horizontally).

### 1) Vertical Dimensionality

i.e., Scripture reveals that worship and musicality (i.e., properly connected) EVOKE the presence/power of God...

**NOTE 1** – ELISHA (i.e., when called upon by the king to secure a prophetic word from the Lord)...

#### 2 Kings 3:15 (Emphasis Mine)

[Elisha said] 15 Now bring me a harpist.” **While** the harpist was playing, the hand of the Lord came on Elisha...

**NOTE 2** – PAUL and SILAS in a Philippian Prison...

#### Acts 16:25–34 (Emphasis Mine)

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were **praying** and **singing** hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. 27 The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

29 The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

31 They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” 32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. 33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. 34 The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

### 2) Horizontal Dimensionality

i.e., Scripture reveals that worshipful song and musicality are tools to inspire and encourage ONE ANOTHER...

#### Ephesians 5:15–20

15 Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. 18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.

**Q. Who has ever heard Bubba say, “There’s a song for that!” and felt encouraged or inspired?**

## APPLICATION #2

SECONDLY, the Songs of Ascent touch upon THEMES that are timeless and timely throughout space and time. In other words, I do NOT have to travel along the highways and byways of ancient Israel unto Jerusalem to APPRECIATE the themes touched upon in these particular psalms.

**KEY** – The themes touched upon herein SHAPE my understanding of God and my walk before Him/among men.

- Psalm 120 – God’s presence in the midst of distress
- Psalm 121 – A song of joyful praise to the Lord
- Psalm 122 – A prayer for the city Jerusalem
- Psalm 123 – Patience in waiting for God
- Psalm 124 – Our help comes from the Lord
- Psalm 125 – Prayer for God’s blessing on His people
- Psalm 126 – A confession that God has done great things
- Psalm 127 – The Lord blesses those efforts “rooted” in Him
- Psalm 128 – Joy for those who follow His ways
- Psalm 129 – A cry for help to the Lord
- Psalm 130 – A prayer of repentance
- Psalm 131 – Surrender as a child to God
- Psalm 132 – The sovereign plan of God for His own
- Psalm 133 – A celebration of brotherly fellowship/unity
- Psalm 134 – Praise to the Lord in His holy Temple (Presence)

**NOTE** – Each theme (i.e., directly or indirectly) plays a PIVOTAL role in the midst of my life and living! Yours?

## APPLICATION #3a

THIRDLY, (i.e., deepest point) these psalms are deeply connected to the themes of PROGRESSION and JOURNEY.

**NOTE 1** – There is a sense of progression and journey in a LITERAL/GEOGRAPHIC sense. In other words, the ancient travelers who utilized these Songs of Ascent started at their HOME (point A) and trekked to the city of JERUSALEM (point B). These were songs for the way, to be experienced and engaged by faithful Jews making their way through varying regions to an ultimate destination. On a DEEPER level...

**NOTE 2** – There is a sense of progression and journey in a more FIGURATIVE/SPIRITUAL sense. The opening song begins FAR AWAY from Jerusalem (cf. Meschec and Kedar in Psalm 120:5—i.e., Asia Minor and Arabia) and progressively move TOWARD the city until the travelers have REACHED the Temple to worship (cf. Ps. 134:1–2).

### Q. Why is this significant?

**A.** This was MORE than a physical journey for the Jews—it was SPIRITUAL. This was a pilgrimage **a)** from that which is pagan to that which is holy; **b)** from darkness to light; **c)** from immorality to that which is pure; and **d)** from spiritual distance to proximity/intimacy (i.e., as Jerusalem was the place wherein God uniquely dwelt). This is why the Jews were always GOING UP to Jerusalem regardless of geography or direction. ZION was the place where God ruled, reigned, occupied and operated from!

**KEY** – This points to an abiding truth. We are ALL on a journey and our experience in Christ is one of progression.

### **1) The Journey from that which is Pagan to that which is Holy**

#### **2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1**

14 Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? 15 What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? 16 What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

“I will live with them  
and walk among them,  
and I will be their God,  
and they will be my people.”

17 Therefore,  
“Come out from them  
and be separate [i.e., holy],  
says the Lord.  
Touch no unclean thing,  
and I will receive you.”

18 And,  
“I will be a Father to you,  
and you will be my sons and daughters,  
says the Lord Almighty.”

1 Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

### **2) The Journey from Darkness (Deception) to Light (Insight/Clarity)**

#### **John 8:12**

12 When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

### **3) The Journey from Immorality/Sinfulness to Purity and Obedience**

#### **Romans 8:28–29**

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who[i] have been called according to his purpose. 29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son [i.e., righteous obedience and complete fidelity]

#### 4) The Journey from Spiritual Distance to Spiritual Proximity/Intimacy

##### **Ephesians 2:1–7, 13, 19–22**

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh[a] and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

13 . . . Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

#### 5) The Journey from this Life to Life Eternal in Glory

**KEY** – Consider that the journey of this life—i.e., for the believer—CULMINATES with our arrival in spiritual Zion!

##### **John 14:1–3 (cf. Rev. 21–22)**

1 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. 2 My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

#### **APPLICATION #3b**

Like the ancients before us, WE are mere travelers (i.e., pilgrims) in this world on our way to a final destination...

##### **1 Peter 2:11**

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles [sojourners; temporary residents; aliens; pilgrims], to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.

##### **Philippians 3:20 (Emphasis Mine)**

20 . . . Our **citizenship** is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

**KEY** – Do NOT get too attached to the things of this earth—we are only passing through! Heaven is our home...

##### **Matthew 6:19–21**

19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

**FYI** – The Songs of Ascent highlight the reality that WE are on a JOURNEY and should live accordingly!

## CONCLUSION PT. 1

**KEY** – Homework...

- 1) July 19 – Ps. 120–124
- 2) July 26 – Ps. 125–129
- 3) Aug. 2 – Ps. 130–134

## CONCLUSION PT. 2

**KEY** – Thank you for taking the time to join us today. Should those of you who have joined us online wish to give, please do so through the giving portal of our church WEBSITE ([www.NewLifeBarre.org](http://www.NewLifeBarre.org)). For those who are present, you may place your donation in the OFFERING BOXES in this Sanctuary.

### **Numbers 6:24–26**

- 24 The Lord bless you  
and keep you;  
25 the Lord make his face shine on you  
and be gracious to you;  
26 the Lord turn his face toward you  
and give you peace.