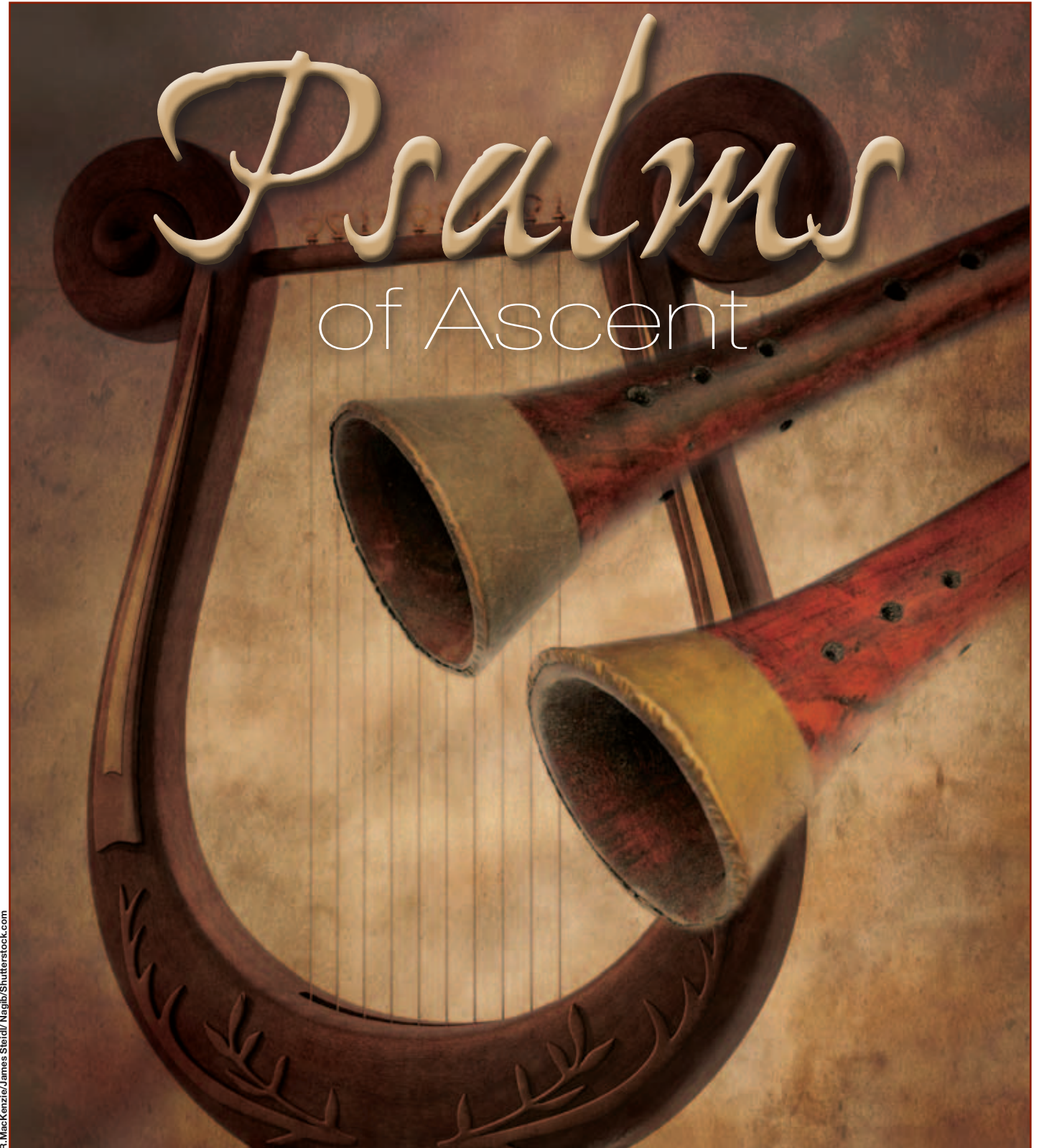


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Psalms of Ascent

During the recent days of the Operation Pillar of Defense in Gaza, a Bridges for Peace volunteer in Israel was able to share Psalm 121 with a woman at the grocery store who was afraid. The lady was then so encouraged by the message, she recited the chapter loudly for everyone around her to hear. She said, "I know that it was for me that I met you. I needed this so much!"

Psalm 121 is part of a very special set of Scripture called the Psalms of Ascent. They are a collection of fifteen psalms, from 120 to 134, each identified at the beginning by the words, "A Song of Ascents." The word "ascent" may also be called "degree." The Strong's number for the word "ascent," as used in our collection of psalms, is H4609. In Hebrew, the word is מעלה (ma'alah) which is used to describe upward movement, such as going up a hill or climbing stairs. We can note from the title, "A **Song** of Ascents," that these psalms were originally put to music and sung by Jewish families on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Who authored this collection of pilgrimage songs? The inscription at the beginning tells us that King David wrote Psalms 122, 124, 131, and 133. His son, King Solomon, wrote Psalm 127. The rest of them do not mention the author by name. If they were written in King David's time, then these psalms are around 3,000 years old. It is amazing that they still speak to us and touch our hearts in such a profound way today.

What makes this collection of psalms unique so that each one was specifically designated as “A Song of Ascents”? What kind of ascent did the writers have in mind? Were they thinking of spiritual ascent with prayer; physically going up the steps into the temple area; or a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Temple? Were they envisioning ascent from an individual perspective or from the nation of Israel? It seems that the answer to these questions is yes—all of the above.

Significant in Worship

The Psalms of Ascent have been and continue to be significant in worship for both the Jewish and Christian faiths. This collection of prayers, poetry, and songs is used for individual meditation, as well as for collective use in worship. During the time of the Temple, priests sang the Psalms of Ascent as they entered the Temple. It says in the *Mishnah* (first written recording of Jewish tradition), “On the fifteen steps which led into the women’s court, corresponding with the fifteen songs of degrees, stood the Levites, with their musical instruments, and sang” (*m. Sukkah* 5:4-5). Even today, selections from the Psalter (a collection of psalms) are sung during worship services in many Christian churches. The Psalms of Ascent are also part of the Jewish prayer book, the *Siddur* (prayer book). Psalm 126 is one of the weekly Sabbath prayers and is also included on holidays, “*When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream*” (v.1).

The Psalms of Ascent would also have been memorized and sung as all the Jewish people traveled long distances to Jerusalem every year for the three pilgrimage festivals of the Lord. Deuteronomy 16:16 says, “*Three times a year all your males shall*



Pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem

Artwork by Larissa Lando

appear before the Lord 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 Lord empty-handed." These were appearances before the Lord by the individual, but the pilgrimages were also done as the entire nation of Israel. The festivals were times of great joy and anticipation as they went up to meet with the Lord. The Hebrew word for festival is מועד "mo-ed" (Strong's H4150). It means an appointed time or place; a sacred season or set feast. It was a time on God's calendar that was set aside for His people.

Jewish History of Ascent

When did the ascent up to Jerusalem begin? Abraham was the first one to go up to Jerusalem. At the very place where the Temple would one day stand, he was told to go up to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. In Genesis 22:8, Abraham tells Isaac, "My son, God will provide for Himself (Yehovah Yireh) the lamb for a burnt offering."

Jacob made the ascent and saw the stairway to heaven, with angels ascending and descending. He was awestruck by this place. In Genesis 28:17 Jacob says, "How awesome *is* this place! This is none other than the house of God (Bethel), and this *is* the gate of heaven!"

King David went up to Jerusalem and was visited by the Angel of the Lord. In 2 Samuel 24:24–25 we are told that he built an altar there. "Then the king said to Araunah, 'No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing.' So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. And David built there an altar to the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the Lord heeded the prayers for the land, and the plague was withdrawn from Israel." This is the site where his son, King Solomon, eventually built the Temple.

The New Testament tells us that Yeshua also made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem many times. He grew up in Nazareth in an observant Jewish family. They would have made the trek to Jerusalem three times a year for the Festivals of the Lord. This was not an easy journey in those days. It would have taken a young, fit male at least two days traveling if he were alone; and a group with children would need up to five days to travel the distance to Jerusalem. Walking routes would have been between 90–120 miles (144–193 kilometers) depending on the decision to pass through Samaria or not. People would have traveled together in groups to be safe from thieves, wild animals, and the elements.

One such journey is described in the second chapter of Luke.

His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast. When they had finished the days, as they returned, the Boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem. And Joseph and His mother did not know it; but supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances. So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him. Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions (Luke 2:41–46).

The group was large enough on this trip that they didn't even notice that Jesus was not with them for an entire day. Jesus would have continued to make this pilgrimage at least three times every year, as it says in Exodus 23:17, "Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God." Before entering the Temple, each person went through one of the many *mikvot* (ritual baths) for purification (John 11:55). The



Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the Temple



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pilgrims entered from the Southern Steps through the Hulda Gates and went up stairs to the Temple Mount.

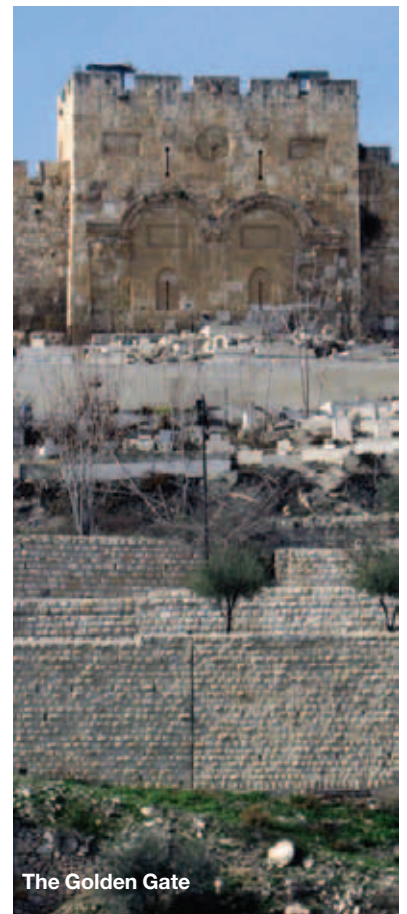
Recognizing Yeshua as a first-century Jewish man, we know He would have continued to travel up to Jerusalem at least three times a year throughout His ministry. The New Testament also tells us that He made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It is thought that He entered through the Golden Gate, or Beautiful Gate, from the eastern wall to the Temple Mount. Many shouted, “*Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!*” (John 12:13). Hosanna is a Hebrew word (*hoshi’ah-na*) that had become a greeting or shout of praise. It actually means “Save!” or “Help!” Yeshua, himself, says in Matthew 23:39, “...you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

As God established his set-apart people, Jerusalem, also called Zion, was so important to Him that He brought them up to this place. He established it as the place where He was to be worshiped; His presence was there; He is zealous for it; and He will establish it again in the future as the New Jerusalem. The Psalms of Ascent would have played a key role of remembrance, prayer, song, and worship for all the Jewish people and the priesthood as well.

Taking the Journey

As believers, we are on a spiritual pilgrimage or journey with the Lord. Psalm 84:5–7 describes the individual journey we make:

*Blessed is the man whose strength is in You,
Whose heart is set on pilgrimage.
As they pass through the Valley of Baca (weeping),
They make it a spring;
The rain also covers it with pools.
They go from strength to strength;
Each one appears before God in Zion.*



The Golden Gate

Photo by Adam Brown

PSALM 122

*I was glad when they
said to me,
“Let us go into the
house of the Lord.”*

*Our feet have been
standing within your
gates, O Jerusalem!*

*Jerusalem is built
as a city that is
compact together,*

*Where the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
to the Testimony of
Israel,
to give thanks to the
name of the Lord.*

*For the thrones are set
there for judgment,
the thrones of the
house of David.*

*Pray for the peace of
Jerusalem:
“May they prosper who
love you.*

*“Peace be within your
walls, prosperity within
your palaces.”*

*For the sake of
my brethren and
companions,
I will now say, “Peace
be within you.”*

*Because of the house
of the Lord our God
I will seek your good.*

Before taking a look at the journey through the Psalms of Ascent, take a moment, if you will, to read these fifteen psalms (120–134). It may sound like a lot, but they are fairly short, mainly comprised of three to eight verses. Some of the most cherished, quoted, prayed, or sung verses in all of Scripture are found in the Psalms of Ascent. The following are some of the highlights from this collection that will provide a lift to help you ascend in your walk.

Psalm 120 was written by someone in a difficult place. The psalmist begins by saying, *“In my distress I cried to the Lord, and He heard me”* (v. 1). Even though the author is in despair, his faith in God as his helper is his focus. He goes on to say, *“Woe is me, that I dwell in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar! My soul has dwelt too long with one who hates peace”* (vv. 5–6). In the world today, we often find ourselves in places among people and situations that are not consistent with our beliefs. For the Bible believer, it is difficult at best, but may result in persecution, even death in some cases.

Psalm 121 begins by acknowledging that God is our helper, *“I will lift up my eyes to the hills—from whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth”* (vv. 1–2). The psalmist tells us that God is always watching over Israel, *“He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.”* (vv. 3b–4). It also says that He watches over us continually, *“The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore”* (v. 8). Special protection by God is for all those who believe in Him.

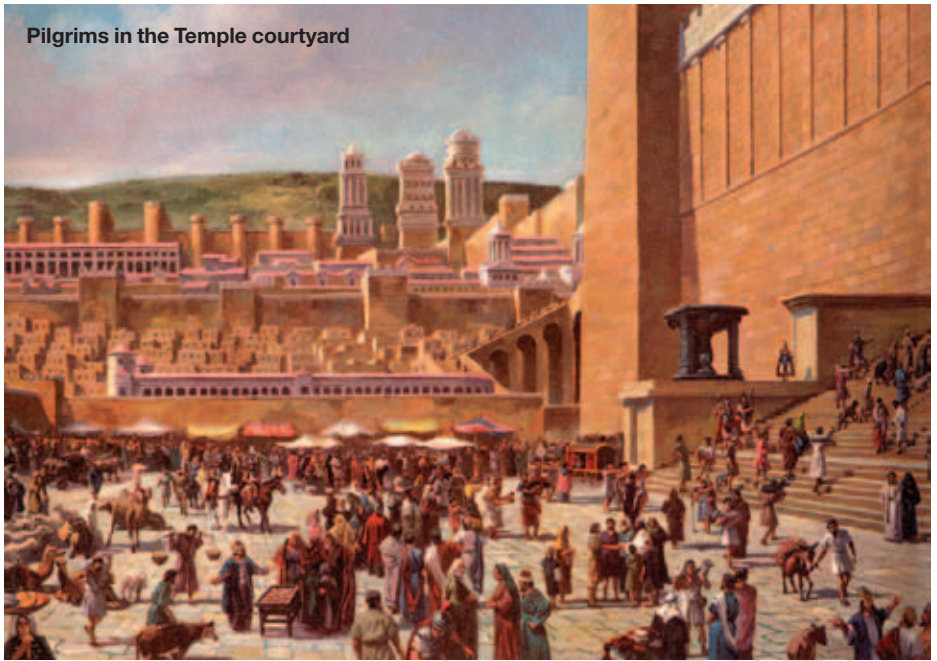
Psalm 122 speaks of the great joy the Israelites felt when they made their pilgrimage to worship and give thanks together at the Temple in Jerusalem. It also urges us to *“pray for the peace of Jerusalem.”* When we pray for the peace of Jerusalem, we are seeking God’s fulfillment for His city, which includes a future time when there will be complete peace when Messiah is ruling and reigning. This psalm is like a slide show of Jerusalem through the ages. Can you picture the thousands of families going up to ancient Jerusalem with great anticipation? The next scene takes place when they arrive at the city gates, at the house of the Lord. Picture the City of David with walls all around it for protection. It is close and compact like each family and community. Next a scene of the future Jerusalem flashes before us with the thrones of the house of David, established there for judgment. The last picture is of Jerusalem in the end of days experiencing a time of complete peace, a peace that will spread out to everyone as it becomes a house of prayer for all nations.



Pilgrims entering the eastern gate of Jerusalem

Artwork by Larissa Lando

Pilgrims in the Temple courtyard



The next step in the journey is **Psalm 123**, where the author is in a place of increasing scorn and contempt from those around him. His response is to acknowledge God and look to Him for mercy. *“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 Lord our God, until He has mercy on us”* (vv. 1–2).

Psalm 124 recounts how God saved His people from destruction. It ends as they acknowledge, *“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth”* (v.9). When we are faced with insurmountable problems, we can call on the One who is able to deliver us.

Psalm 125:1–2 says we are immovable if we are in Him and that He has us surrounded. *“Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people from this time forth and forever.”* Here the author has left the world and its problems behind to dwell securely in the peace of the Lord.

The pilgrimage is no longer just a visit in **Psalm 126**, but it is the future gathering of the exiles to the land of Israel. *“When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’ The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad”* (vv. 1–3).

Psalm 127 reminds us that apart from Him, we can do nothing. *“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain”* (v. 1). He does it all!

The beginning of **Psalm 128** brings us to the basic truth that everything starts with the fear of the Lord. If we love Him, we keep His commandments. *“Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways”* (v. 1). We see the continued blessing by the Lord at the end, *“The Lord bless you out of Zion, and may you see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life. Yes, may you see your children’s children. Peace be upon Israel!”* (vv. 5–6).

Psalm 129 is a song of victory over Israel’s enemies. *“Let all those who hate Zion be put to shame and turned back. Let them be as the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up, with which the reaper does not fill his hand, nor he who binds sheaves, his arms. Neither let those who pass by them say. ‘The blessing of the Lord be upon you; we bless you in the name of the Lord!’”* (vv. 5–8).

Moving upward, **Psalm 130** tells of how we can have hope in God. When we cry out to God in repentance, He forgives. When we cry out to God in times of trouble and distress, He is our help. *“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I do hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning—yes, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities”* (vv. 5–8).

Psalm 131 is written by David and is comprised of three verses. It shows us that we should be in a position of peace and hope as we wait on the Lord.

*LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty.
Neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor with things too profound for me.
Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul,
Like a weaned child with his mother;
Like a weaned child is my soul within me.
O Israel, hope in the LORD
From this time forth and forever.*

*“As the
mountains
surround
Jerusalem,
so the Lord
surrounds His
people from this
time forth and
forever.”*

Psalm 125:2

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In **Psalm 132**, we read how significant Zion (Jerusalem) is to the LORD. It is the one place He selected out of the entire world to be His forever. This explains why there is always warfare in Jerusalem, both in the spiritual and the natural. We can see why Jerusalem will be “*a cup of drunkenness to all the surrounding peoples*” as it says in Zechariah 12:2, because He has an eternal plan for this special place. “*For the LORD has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his dwelling: ‘This is my resting place for ever and ever; here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it’*” (vv. 13–14).

As we continue ascending, we come to **Psalm 133**. You may feel like singing or dancing by this point. This psalm was also written by King David and contains three verses.

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!
It is like precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard,
The beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments.
It is like the dew of Hermon descending upon the mountains of Zion;
For there the LORD commanded the blessing—life forevermore.*

Whenever there is strife and division, it is not God’s plan for us. It is pleasing to Him when we dwell together in unity, peace, and love. He wants to bless us with this fellowship with Him and with others, now and for all time.

After reading the last Song of Ascent, **Psalm 134**, you may find yourself standing with hands raised in worship:

*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, and bless the LORD.
The LORD, who made heaven and earth, bless you from Zion!*

In these days, there may be uncertainty all around us, but we can be certain of God and His Word. When we are around other people, we can extend this much-needed hope to them. Maybe you are someone who has not been in a good place; turn to the Psalms of Ascent and be encouraged in this journey with the Lord.

By Joanne Gosselin
BFP Staff Writer

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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

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