

**Worshiping
on the Way**

Worshiping on the Way

The Psalms of Ascents

Jonathan Landry Cruse



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Worshiping on the Way

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For Jacob, Evangeline, and Caleb,

my fellow little pilgrims—

What a joy it is to worship with you on the way

And to Him who has clean hands

and a pure heart (Ps. 24:4)



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Preface

Like most of my writing, this book was developed from a series of sermons that was initially preached at Community Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, during the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown. Providentially, Psalm 122 (“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the LORD’”) was the first text we considered upon reopening our doors after ten weeks strictly online. I can hardly think of a more fitting message! Due to space restrictions in our small sanctuary, we had to have two worship services, and many people spilled out onto the lawn for worship as well. But the desire and determination to be back in church with God’s people embodied the message of the psalms I was preaching. So my thanks goes to that dear congregation, as well as to the elders, who are always an encouragement to me in my ministry. Particular thanks must go to one of our members, Michal McElvain, who pored over this manuscript multiple times to improve its style and sharpen its message.

I am very grateful to James Hamilton and his work on the Psalms, including a course on preaching the Psalms that he taught in the summer of 2023 for RTS Orlando. It reignited my passion for this project. Andrew Miller also reviewed the manuscript at an early stage, which was immensely valuable, and my dad encouraged me in this project as he reviewed the material. This is now my fifth (!) project with RHB, and I am just as grateful as ever for the team there. I am amazed at the kindness of God that permits me to participate in their ministry, which has blessed so many around the world. Thanks to Joel, David, Jay, and Annette!

I have dedicated this book to my three kids. It's a book about why pilgrims need the church. This is a lesson my wife, Kerri Ann, and I have tried to instill in them from the earliest of days. By God's grace, at this stage in their life they love the church. They see Sunday as the best day of the week. Kids: never lose that love for corporate worship. It's the greatest thing this side of heaven. It's the grace God gives to get us to glory. When you're older, I pray that reading these pages might help you see that all the more. Press on!

Introduction: Who May Ascend?

Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?

Or who may stand in His holy place?

—PSALM 24:3

“Goal achieved—3X!”

This is what my watch buzzed at me as my wife and I continued our laborious self-guided tour of Geneva, Switzerland. We had fewer than twelve hours to spend in the historic city, so we were booking it, speed walking through the hilly, cobblestone streets of Old Town in order to see all the significant sites. This included a climb to the top of John Calvin’s former church, St. Pierre’s Cathedral (on a sweltering 95-degree day in Switzerland, mind you!). It was up one of the many stairwells at St. Pierre’s that my watch congratulated me on reaching my “elevation goal” not once, not twice—but three times! I was quite pleased with myself.

But those sorts of stats do not reflect the normal state of affairs. My average day as a pastor is mainly sedentary: sitting in front of a computer, behind a book, or across from a congregant at a coffee shop. Days of crushing elevation goals or walking over thirty thousand steps are few and far between. And while I have biked the forty-mile trail westward from our home to Lake Michigan a number of times, I have never dared the eastward return. You see, from my house to the lake there is a gradual, imperceptible decline helping me along. Interestingly, that same slight change of gradation becomes quite perceptible on the way back.

We can easily discern the incline in the Christian life, too, can’t

we? We are “sojourners” (1 Peter 2:11), journeying from earth to heaven. In other words, the Christian life is lived on the ascent, and that can be just as hard—no, much harder—than facing an upslope on a hike or bike ride. “The way to heaven is ascending,” wrote Jonathan Edwards. “We must be content to travel up hill, though it be hard and tiresome, and contrary to the natural bias of the flesh.”¹ Growing in godliness does not come naturally or easily. Saying no to sin and self and yes to holiness is a constant struggle. We wrestle internally to do what is pleasing in the sight of God. Why? Because sin has a massive spiritual g-force. With each Spirit-empowered step forward, the powers of hell seek to shove us backward. Hence, we are implored to “lay aside every weight” of sin that wraps so tightly around us as we step out in the Christian life (Heb. 12:1). But Satan will use everything at his disposal to drag us down and frustrate our progress.

What Are the Psalms of Ascents?

Nowhere else does Scripture employ such rich and effective imagery of the believer’s heavenward pilgrimage than in the Psalms of Ascents. These fifteen songs, Psalms 120–134, nestled together near the end of the Psalter, were likely sung by Hebrew pilgrims making their way to the Holy City, Jerusalem, for one of the annual sacred celebrations (Passover, the Feast of Booths, and the Feast of Weeks). They also would have made for suitable singing during the national return from exile into the Promised Land (see especially Psalm 126).

In either case, the focus is Jerusalem. These are songs “of the homeward marches.”² Even more specifically, the lyrics draw the singers’ voices—and affections—to Zion, the center of worship within the Holy City and “the joy of the whole earth” (Ps. 48:2). Jerusalem or Zion is referenced directly in more than half the Psalms of Ascents (122, 125, 126, 128, 129, 132, 133, and 134), and indirectly in Psalm

1. Jonathan Edwards, *The Christian Pilgrim; or the True Christian Life a Journey towards Heaven*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (1834; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000), 2:243.

2. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 5:749.

121, with many scholars agreeing that the hills mentioned therein refer to the landscape surrounding Jerusalem.

Another theme that recurs in this anthology is that of blessing. Twelve of the fifteen songs make some allusion to the well-known Aaronic benediction of Numbers 6:24–26:

The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face shine upon you,
And be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,
And give you peace.

Here are a few examples:

So our eyes look to the LORD our God,
Until He is gracious to us. (123:2 NASB)

Peace be upon Israel! (125:5)

The LORD bless you out of Zion,
And may you see the good of Jerusalem
All the days of your life. (128:5)

The LORD who made heaven and earth
Bless you from Zion! (134:3)

Additionally, Psalm 121 is “for all intents and purposes an exposition of this single phrase from the priestly benediction: ‘and keep you.’”³

One scholar suggests that blessing is the “unifying theme” of this collection of songs.⁴ This makes sense: Zion was the location of the temple, where the priests ministered before the Lord for the sake of the people. One of the priests’ great responsibilities was to pronounce a benediction on the people in the name of the Lord—to assure the nation that God was disposed favorably toward them. The composers of these psalms understood that to dwell in Zion was to dwell in the land of blessing. As we are told in the penultimate psalm of ascents:

3. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2015), 216.

4. See Leon J. Liebreich, “The Songs of Ascents and the Priestly Blessing,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74 (1955): 33–36.

“For there the LORD commanded the blessing—life forevermore” (Ps. 133:3).

How Can We Use the Psalms of Ascents Today?

With this background in mind, we are better positioned to apply this section of the Psalter to our lives today. While any portion of God’s Word could be applied in a myriad of ways, I would suggest that this particular portion serves two important functions: cultivating godly desire and keeping godly determination.

Looking Up: Godly Desire

If one of the great commands Jesus gives to all His disciples is “follow Me” (e.g., Matt. 9:9; Mark 1:17; Luke 9:23), that means we are called to a climb. The disciples’ path is not only upward but heavenward, for this is what it means to follow the One who has now ascended to glory. Similarly, these psalms teach us that to dwell with God we must go up. With each strenuous step on the rising path toward Zion, the Israelites were reminded that they belonged in a different realm. Paul would tell us that “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20). That is where we belong, yet we are not there. We are resident aliens of another world, making the long expedition homeward.

Just as these psalms express Israel’s love for Jerusalem, we must likewise be in love with the heavenly Jerusalem. Jesus says, “Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:20–21). Is your heart in heaven? These fifteen songs will help place it there. With their unfiltered look at the wickedness of the world around us and their earnest pleas for God to watch and keep, these psalms are necessary gear for every pilgrim. We read, meditate on, and sing out these psalms as a means of falling out of love with the world and deepening our longing for that far country. Consider this description of God’s dwelling place. Doesn’t your heart burn within you to dwell there too?

For the LORD has chosen Zion;
He has desired it for His dwelling place:
“This is My resting place forever;

Here I will dwell, for I have desired it.
I will abundantly bless her provision;
I will satisfy her poor with bread.
I will also clothe her priests with salvation,
And her saints shall shout aloud for joy.
There I will make the horn of David grow;
I will prepare a lamp for My Anointed.
His enemies I will clothe with shame,
But upon Himself His crown shall flourish.”
(Ps. 132:13–18)

Paul echoes this basic ethic of the Christian life when he instructs us to “seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:1–2). We are to seek—that is to pursue, to set our hearts and our minds on—the things that are above. This is hard to do. It can be so easy to train our sights on earth and the things that surround us on a daily basis. But by immersing ourselves in the world above, we will learn to love it. To read these psalms is to look up, and by looking up we find the godly desire that will never be disappointed. As C. S. Lewis memorably put it, “Aim at heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’; aim at earth and you will get neither.”⁵

Keeping On: Godly Determination

The journey from the burdensome here to the blessed there is no walk in the park. Satan does not want us to reach our destination. More than that, oftentimes we ourselves have little desire to make the journey. The cares of this world distract us or the comforts of this life lure us away from what we need most: to be with God (Ps. 73:28). But when we look up and cultivate a desire to be with God, it will inevitably come coupled with a determination to get there. Christians who do not keep their eyes on the prize will have no hope of attaining it. So Paul says, “I do not run aimlessly,” and likewise instructs us to “run that [we] may obtain [the prize]” (1 Cor. 9:26, 24, respectively, ESV).

5. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 118.

We should admire the tenacity of these ancient pilgrims. To reach their destination was not as simple as purchasing a flight to Ben Gurion Airport on Expedia. They risked their lives to reach the city of God. They left the comforts and security of home. The pilgrims who first sang these songs knew full well that their trip could include the threat of wild animals, thieves, or the unforgiving elements of nature—and yet they set out nonetheless. A theological conviction informs this determination, and, as James Hamilton helpfully shows, the very structure of the Psalter indicates as much. Psalm 118 rejoices in the triumphal entrance of the messianic King (vv. 19–24) into the Holy City to establish God’s law, which is then expressed in Psalm 119. “Now that he has triumphed, the people are magnetically drawn to Jerusalem, singing the songs of goings up, the songs of ascents, in [Psalms] 120–134.”⁶ In other words, when the people knew what awaited them in Zion—their King and the blessing of “life forevermore” (Ps. 133:3)—how could they not go up?

John Bunyan provides a powerful illustration of this determination. At the start of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian has barely begun his travels to the Celestial City when his wife and children call him to return home. Can you think of a more pressing reason to abandon some worthy plan than that your family needs you? But Christian understood—at least at this point—what was at stake if he deserted his path: “Now he had not run far from his own door, but his Wife and Children perceiving it, began to cry after him to return; but the Man put his fingers in his ears, and ran on crying, *Life! Life! Eternal Life!* So he looked not behind him.”⁷

A Rest upon the Way

So these psalms impress on us the need for a desire and determination for the things of God. For Israelite pilgrims, desire and determination were the greatest tools along their journey. Beyond meditating on these particular texts, is there any other way we can cultivate these

6. James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham Academic, 2021), 2:380.

7. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2017), 5.

necessary tools for our pilgrimage? I believe there is: *going to church*. In fact, this section of the Psalter cries out to us that we need corporate worship. The best way to grow within us a love for the dwelling place of God and the world of worship that we will inhabit for eternity is by experiencing it now on Sundays. Indeed, this is *precisely* what we experience in gathered corporate worship. Did you know that? In new covenant worship, united to Christ and lifted by the Holy Spirit, we ascend into the heavenly places themselves: “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel” (Heb. 12:22–24).

What a thought! Something as simple as a church worship service is actually the portal through which we enter, for a moment, the heavenly places. As Tremper Longman says, the ancient ascent of the Israelite pilgrim was not just a symbol or metaphor for a spiritual journey—it was a spiritual journey itself. It was truly the way the people under the old covenant came to meet with God. “The trip to the temple on Zion in Jerusalem would involve not only a physical journey, but also a spiritual one, since Jerusalem was the place where heaven met earth.”⁸ Under the new covenant, now the gathering of the people of God—namely, the church—is where heaven meets earth. And so as we come into worship, we are embarking on a spiritual journey.

Actually, perhaps it would be better to say that Sunday worship is the much-needed reprieve in our arduous spiritual journey. Sunday worship offers a rest on our pilgrim way, where we can sit under God’s word and be nourished by His own presence. Thus, corporate worship is indispensable as we make our way to Zion. We would collapse or go astray without this sweet provision and rhythm of rest and recuperation.

8. Tremper Longman III, *Psalms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 410.

It is something like that perfectly situated bench along a hiking trail up a steep mountainside. If you have ever taken the opportunity to sit down mid-hike and catch your breath, you know the temptation not to get back up again. Your feet are begging you not to! Sometimes sheer determination is enough to get you back up and on your way. But imagine that this bench is in a clearing, a lookout that surveys the beautiful valley you have left behind and also offers a glimpse of the gorgeous peak to which you are heading. Now to your determination is added a second even stronger motivation to keep going: *desire*. You have just had a glimpse of the breathtaking view that you will get when you reach the top, and now you can't stop until you take it all in.

In a similar manner, corporate worship opens up to us the vista of heaven. It gives us a glimpse of where we are headed and pulls our hearts and our affections in that direction. Through prayer we engage with the living God, in preaching we hear Christ speak to us, in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper we feast and fellowship with Him—and all this in the company of the saints, each congregation being a portion of the richly diverse tapestry of God's people that we will know entirely only in glory. We cannot be satisfied with just this small taste, this mere glimpse. We yearn for the real thing. We yearn to be with God.

This theme is embedded into the Psalms of Ascents, and we will return to it again and again throughout the book: corporate worship on earth fuels our pilgrimage to the corporate worship service in heaven. The church serves as heaven's outpost here on earth, and when we come together for its services of worship, we find real and true spiritual rejuvenation.

Heaven's Gates to Open Wide

Being with God and dwelling in His high and holy place were the desire and determination of pious Israelites. But mixed in was also a sort of desperation: Could the journey ever be accomplished? Could they actually ever reach God? This is expressed outside the Psalms of Ascents in two places: "LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle?

Who may dwell in Your holy hill?” (Ps. 15:1); “Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place?” (Ps. 24:3).

The answer in both instances is the one who is perfectly holy. The one who walks uprightly before the Lord, exhibiting “clean hands” (no sinful actions) and a “pure heart” (no sinful desires) is permitted entrance into the presence of God (Ps. 24:4). Herman Witsius explains, “As sin shut the gates of heaven, nothing but holiness could set them open again.”⁹ Do you start to sense the Israelites’ desperation? Who could ever present such a spiritual résumé? After all, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Since we have fallen short of the King’s glory, we must put our faith in the King of glory. This is what Israel did. After a long list of qualifications for entering God’s presence that relentlessly condemn wretched sinners, the people would triumphantly and in great faith declare,

Lift up your heads, O you gates!
 And be lifted up, you everlasting doors!
 And the King of glory shall come in.
 Who is this King of glory?
 The LORD strong and mighty,
 The LORD mighty in battle.
 Lift up your heads, O you gates!
 Lift up, you everlasting doors!
 And the King of glory shall come in.
 Who is this King of glory?
 The LORD of hosts,
 He is the King of glory. (Ps. 24:7–10)

The people knew that if they were to enter the gates of glory, if they were to make their ascent up to Zion and not find the door barred to them, God would have to open the gates. He alone had the holiness and righteousness that are requisite for entering the land of perfection. Though they didn’t know entirely how, they believed that this King of glory would bring them into Zion with Him. What they

9. Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 1:195.

knew in part we know in whole. We know the name of this King of glory: Jesus Christ. He alone is the one who can say, “Open *to me* the gates of righteousness; I will go through them” (Ps. 118:19). In the words of an old hymn,

There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heav’n, and let us in.¹⁰

It is Jesus who comes with the clean hands and the pure heart that God requires of us. Quoting from Psalm 40, the author of Hebrews pictures Jesus declaring His divinely appointed mission statement:

Therefore, when He came into the world, He said:
“Sacrifice and offering You did not desire,
But a body You have prepared for Me.
In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin
You had no pleasure.
Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come—
In the volume of the book it is written of Me—
To do Your will, O God.’” (10:5–7)

It was Christ who fought that uphill fight of holiness for us.

For Christ, the hill of the Lord—before it was Mount Zion—was Calvary. And He ascended it for us in order to be sacrificed. As it is written, “In the Mount of the LORD it shall be provided” (Gen. 22:14). On Mount Calvary the ultimate sacrifice and substitute was provided for all who would reach out and claim Him with the hand of faith. Christ was the only worthy substitute because He was and is the only one to ever live with perfectly clean hands, a perfectly pure heart, and a perfectly devoted will to God, even when it meant death. With that in mind, think of the significance of these words from Luke’s gospel: “When the time had come for Him to be received up... He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51). Looking up to Jerusalem, Jesus

10. Cecil Frances Alexander, “There Is a Green Hill Far Away,” in *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* (Willow Grove, Pa.: Trinity Psalter Hymnal Joint Venture, 2018), no. 347.

knew there would be an immense weight bearing down on Him as He climbed upward; there would be a cross to carry (John 19:17).

And as He carried that cross, in a way He was really carrying us. He was carrying our sin, our guilt, and our curse. As our priest, He was taking us to be cleansed by His once-for-all sacrifice. In this way, we are made pure as He is pure (1 John 3:3). Having thus brought us up to the cross, He can take us further still: since “then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is.... For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:1, 3). United to Him by faith, it can truly be said we have ascended even now with Christ into the holy place.

And yet, even so, what is now only a spiritual reality will soon become a physical reality as well. We soon will enter the glorious gates of heaven ourselves to dwell with our God and Savior and never again be separated. Christ is seated in glory as the incarnate God-man, so it can be said that “we have our own flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that Christ our head will also take us, his members, up to himself.”¹¹ Then our journey will be accomplished, our race finished, and our joy complete. So let this section of the Psalter—and I pray, this little book too—spur you on in this brief, earthly pilgrimage, especially as it would compel you to experience a taste of the heavenly Mount Zion even now in corporate worship. This is where we must regularly find ourselves until the day we lay down our burdens, having made it the whole way up.

Let me assure you, when you complete the climb, you will have something far better than a smartwatch congratulating you. The reward is the voice of our Savior: “Well done!” Isn’t it a remarkable thing that we should get the praise for completing such a journey when He carried us on His shoulders the whole way?



11. Heidelberg Catechism 49.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. What have been some of the significant hindrances to your Christian walk? What sorts of resources helped you through that difficult time?
2. In what way do the corporate life of the church and public worship connect with our personal sanctification and Christian pilgrimage?
3. Read through all fifteen Psalms of Ascents. What are some common major themes that stood out to you? Did any particular psalm stand out as a favorite? Which one and why?