

A BIBLICAL STUDY ON PRAISE
LESSON ELEVEN: TRAVELING WITH PRAISE

by Sandy Harber

"I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord." Psalm 122:1

Have you ever been part of a Christian group traveling by bus, van, or car when one person starts singing a chorus, hymn, or popular spiritual song? Almost immediately other voices join in. Pretty soon everyone is singing along. The concert continues until the destination is reached. And everyone exits the vehicle smiling and laughing. Hearts are light. The mood is cheerful. Praising the Lord lifts us up to a higher plane.

Now project yourself back about 2,000 years. You are joining your neighbors in a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Three times a year adult Jewish males were required to journey to the Temple and participate in the celebration of three feasts: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Exodus 34:22, 23). The men took their families along, traveling in large companies of neighbors banded together for safety and fellowship. These Jews came from all over Israel - and beyond - traveling up to Jerusalem (no matter your starting point, you always go up to Jerusalem). These pilgrimages were regarded as privileges rather than duties. The mood was joyous as they traveled, voices joined together singing Psalms 120-134, known as the Pilgrim Psalms or Psalms of Ascent (we're going up, remember).

Now imagine it is September/October, time for the people to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths. When the pilgrims arrived in Jerusalem, each family would build a "booth" out of bulrushes as a reminder of God's past provision for their ancestors as they traveled from Egypt to the Promised Land. This holiday was also called the "Feast of Ingathering" because it took place after all the crops had been harvested and gathered into storehouses. The people were celebrating God's present provision for them in the Land that He had promised their ancestors. They carried baskets of produce and decorated their booths with fruits and vegetables.

The pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Temple followed a set routine which opened each morning with the leader quoting Jer. 31:6 inviting them to "go up to Zion unto the Lord our God." The people would reply with Psalm 122:1. The individual playing the flute then began the procession, followed by the bullock that would be sacrificed when Jerusalem was reached. The multitude followed, singing the Psalms of Ascent. As they entered the gates of the city the people sang, "Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem" (Psalm 122:2). A deputation of priests, Levites, and treasurers would greet the pilgrims. Then, as the people ascended to the Temple, they sang Psalm 150. When the people entered the courts of the Temple to present their baskets of first fruits, the Levites sang Psalm 30. Next, each person would present his gift basket and, then, quote Deut. 26:3. A priest would wave the basket and quote Deut. 26:10. Finally, the worshipper would put the basket on the altar, bow down, and depart.

There were seven days of celebration in the Temple for the Feast of Tabernacles. During the second day the Levite singers would stand at the top of the 15 steps that lead from the Court of Israel down to the Court of Women and sing the Psalms of Ascent, also called the Psalms of Degrees. On the top step, the Levites sang Psalm 120. Then they descend one step, stopped, and sang Psalm 121. The singers continue singing each of the 15 Psalms of Ascent as they descend into the Court of the Women one step at a time. This process was repeated on days three through seven of the celebration.

The Psalms of Ascent, or Degrees, remind us that our lives are constantly progressing. We began life as sinners. But by God's grace, through faith in Jesus, we were brought into God's family. We progressed from lost sinners to saved sinners. And, now, we are experiencing the progression of sanctification, whereby we are being refined, becoming (hopefully) more like Jesus every day. We have many reasons to praise the Lord as we travel the road of life.

"Blessed is every one that feareth the Lord; that walketh in his ways." Psalm 128:1