



There are two biblical designations for people of faith that are extremely useful for figuring out how to live in this world: disciple and pilgrim. *Disciple* (*mathētēs*) says we are people who spend our lives apprenticed to our master, Jesus Christ. We are in a growing-learning relationship, always. A disciple is a learner, but not in the academic setting of a school-room, rather at the work site of a craftsman. We do not acquire information about God but skills in faith.

*Pilgrim* (*parepidēmos*) tells us we are people who spend our lives going someplace, going to God, and whose path for getting there is the way, Jesus Christ. We realize that “this world is not my home” and set out for “the Father’s house.” Abraham, who “went out,” is our archetype. Jesus, answering Thomas’s question “Master, we have no idea where you’re going. How do you expect us to know the road?” gives us directions: “*I am the Way (or the Road), also the Truth, also the Life. No one gets to the Father apart from me*” (Jn 14:5-6).

In his book about the Psalms of Ascent, (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*) Eugene Peterson says Psalms 120-134 could be called “Songs for the Road:” - “In the pastoral work of training people in discipleship and accompanying them in pilgrimage, I have found, tucked away in the Hebrew Psalter, an old dog-eared songbook. I have used it to provide continuity in guiding others in the Christian way and directing people of faith in the conscious and continuous effort that develops into maturity in Christ. The old songbook is called, in Hebrew, *shiray hammaloth*—Songs of Ascents.”

These fifteen psalms were likely sung, possibly in sequence, by Hebrew pilgrims as they went up to Jerusalem to the great worship festivals. Topographically Jerusalem was the highest city in Palestine, and so all who traveled there spent much of their time ascending. But the ascent was not only literal, it was also a metaphor: the trip to Jerusalem acted out a life lived upward toward God, an existence that advanced from one level to another in developing maturity—what Paul described as “the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus” (Phil 3:14.)

Three times a year faithful Hebrews made that trip. The Hebrews were a people whose salvation had been accomplished in the Exodus, whose identity had been defined at Sinai and whose preservation had been assured in the forty years of wilderness wandering. As such a people, they regularly climbed the road to Jerusalem to worship. They refreshed their memories of God’s saving ways at the Feast of Passover in the spring; they renewed their commitments as God’s covenanted people at the Feast of Pentecost in early summer; they responded as a blessed community to the best that God had for them at the Feast of Tabernacles in the autumn. They were a redeemed people, a commanded people, a blessed people. These foundational realities were preached and taught and praised at the annual feasts. Between feasts the people lived these realities in daily discipleship until the time came to go up to the mountain city again as pilgrims to renew the covenant.

This picture of the Hebrews singing these fifteen psalms as they left their routines of discipleship and made their way from towns and villages, farms and cities, as pilgrims up to Jerusalem is our best background for understanding life as a faith-journey. There are no better “songs for the road” for those who travel the way of faith in Christ, a way that has so many continuities with the way of Israel. Since many (not all) essential items in Christian discipleship are incorporated in these songs, they provide a way to remember who we are and where we are going and to give us the encouragement and guidance we need along the way. If we learn to sing them well, they can be a kind of daily guide for discipleship and pilgrimage in the Christian faith.

From chapter 1 of ***A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*** by: Eugene Peterson  
A Study on The Psalms of Ascent