Objective: To inspire a greater appreciation of the Psalms, more understanding, an understanding that is far richer, more comforting, more encouraging, and more challenging. We have become a culture that values that which is new and innovative, and this has dramatically affected our usage of the Psalms which are part song book, and part prayer book, and part theological treatise, all at the same time. The Psalms have a way of expressing the deep cries of the soul in powerful and evocative ways that draw us ever more deeply into relationship with God. They are time tested, effective, and God-breathed.

The Psalms of Ascents in particular provide some additional challenges and it will be the goal of this study to explore their usage in both ancient and more modern times. A part of our goal is to demonstrate how they can still be powerfully relevant for us today in our pilgrimage of faith.

Materials: The Bible, textbooks, journal articles, maps, charts and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures
1. To examine the ancient usage of these Psalms, and their original context.
2. To seek to understand the meaning and impact that these Psalms had on ancient people.
3. To endeavor to comprehend how we should understand these Psalms in our modern era while at the same time honoring and respecting the original intent.
4. To allow these ancient Psalms to inspire and challenge our pilgrimage toward greater understanding and deeper relationship with God.
As we begin this series on the Psalms of Ascent there needs to be the recognition that this will not the first time that we have studied these Psalms here at Broadway, we focused on these same Psalms in 2008 when we studied the book by Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. However, this time, the intent is to go much deeper and to focus much more on the Psalms themselves. This time, the focus is going to begin with laying a foundation of understanding about what the original intent was for these Psalms and then to recognize that through history that original purpose has changed with the changing circumstances and understanding of the people of God. It is also the intent of this study to highlight the overall importance of the Psalms among the people of God and how the Psalms are increasingly relevant as we are inundated with a variety, and a diversity, of new songs that provide an avalanche that can at times overwhelm our senses. Additionally, the theology of many of these new songs is either shallow, or downright wrong, and the Psalms can aid in our recognition of a proper theology and increase the depth of our understanding of God.
N. T. Wright, in his book entitled *The Case for the Psalms* delivers a passionate plea for the church to not abandon the Psalms as the great hymnbook for the people of God. He speaks of this hymnbook as being, “at the heart of the Bible,” and as having, “been the daily lifeblood of Christians, and of course Jewish people, from the earliest times.” Despite this, in many of our churches today, the Psalms are not being used, and even where they are still being used, very often, they are reduced to nothing more than filler between other parts of the service. There are even times when people do not realize that they are actually singing the words of the Psalms, when they are singing. Wright has written his book in order to reverse this trend and to restore a greater, more biblical, and God-centered balance. The Psalms are among the oldest poems in the world, and they still rank alongside any poetry, from any culture as some of the best poetry ever composed. They are filled with power and passion, with horrendous misery, unrestrained expressions of jubilation, tender sensitivity, and powerful hope.¹ These are all things that in

the past were relevant, and needed by the people of God, and they certainly are things that are still relevant and needed today.

The fifteen Psalms that we designate as the Psalms of Ascents are so designated because of a superscription that stands at the beginning of each of these Psalms (יהי נְאֵלָנוּת "Song of ascents, or Song of steps, in the Septuagint Ὀδὴ τῶν ἀναβαθμῶν). The suggestions for interpreting this superscription have been quite diverse. Syntactically, this phrase is problematic. The problem is not only that there is a degree of ambiguity in the relationship of these two words to each other, but also in exactly how to translate them. There have been times when the interpretation of this superscription has overwhelmed, and taken precedence over the interpretation of the remainder of the Psalms because depending upon how one interprets this superscription the meaning of the remainder of the Psalms is transformed.² An example of this can be seen in the early Greek translation of the Psalm 120 (that early Greek translation is called the Septuagint, and in that translation Psalm 120, of the Hebrew Bible, is designated as Psalm 119), which translates this

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phrase more literally as “Song of the stairs” (ᾨδὴ τῶν ἀναβαθμῶν).

In reality, this is certainly a possible translation, and a possible understanding of even the Hebrew phrase.

The question is, what does the phrase actually mean, how does it relate to the Psalms and what difference does it make? The issue has been, and continues to be, a critical one for the matter of interpretation. If one interprets the phrase as having to do with “steps” then there are a variety of questions that present themselves such as: 1. Which steps? 2. Are they figurative, or physical steps? If physical, do they refer to some particular occasion, or just to pilgrimage in general? 3. Is there a particular occasion that these Psalms refer to? Such as to one, or perhaps more, of the festivals of Israel? 4. Is this collection of Psalms intended to be a unified collection of Psalms at all? 5. Is this perhaps some form of musical term that connects these Psalms? This is by no means an exhaustive list of question regarding this aspect of interpretation. If the phrase is not a reference to steps it also important to know what it actually does refer to, what is being ascended?
We will come back to these questions, but first let us explore some background for the Psalms. According to the Rabbis ten men and David composed the Book of Psalms, though David actually wrote them down. It appears that before our current Book of Psalms existed, in its current collected form, it existed in separate collections, at least this is the case according to their headings. It perhaps existed as a collection, or possibly several collections of David’s psalms; a collection of Asaph psalms; another of Korah psalms, and a collection called the Songs of Ascents. According to Rabbinic tradition, David collected these together along with songs from a variety of elders. The Songs of Ascents have always been popular and in conjunction with Psalms 135 and 136 they form the Great Hallel that is sung at the Passover meal. Up to this very day, many observant Jews still recite all fifteen Songs of Ascents every Shabbat afternoon. In the second century A.D., when Jerusalem was known as Aelia Capitolina, and the Emperor Hadrian built a temple to Jupiter on the Temple Mount, Christians sang Psalm 122 beneath

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3 Midrash Rabbah to the Song of Songs, IV.4.1, cf. IV.19; Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 14b/15a; cf. Jerusalem Talmud, Pesahim 1c.
Jupiter’s foundations (In domum domine ibimus “Let us go to the house of the Lord”).

There are a number of things about the Songs of Ascents that make it apparent that they are intended to be a collection of songs meant to be grouped together. One of these, is the general mood of the songs, they share a quiet bliss that expresses a rare serenity for the Psalms. They also share a common theology. This can be seen first, in the names that these songs use for God. Most common in these Psalms, by far, is the usage of the sacred personal name, YHWH, which is often rendered LORD, or the ETERNAL. This name occurs 51 times in this short collection while the shortened form YAH, appears twice more. The term Elohim, that is, “God” occurs only two times, and both of these times it appears in conjunction with YHWH (Psalms 122:9; 123:2). This usage, stands in striking contrast to the other Psalms, which use Elohim frequently and freely. The question you may be asking is what difference does this make? For one thing it indicates that these Psalms share this commonality. Additionally, there is an old Hebrew tradition that associates the designation

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Elohim with God’s judgment and the designation YVWH with his mercy. So perhaps, it is not going too far when we see that YHWH appears often in the Songs of Ascents and the designation Elohim appears only rarely we might conclude that the Holy One is smiling in the Psalms of Ascents.

The Ascents also use the designation Maker of heaven and earth, three times, a title that occurs only two other times in the rest of the Bible. These Psalms completely avoid using divine names that are characteristically used in other psalm groupings. They do not mention the Korahite titles, “Most High God (El Elyon),” “Living God (El Hai)” and the martial “Lord of Hosts (ts’vaot).” They also avoid using the amalgamated titles used in the Asaph Psalms (Psalms 50:1; 80:4,19). The simple usage of the merciful name YHWH seems to be sufficient for the Psalms of Ascents. The overall theology of the Psalms of Ascents can be summed up in the simple words as “YHWH blesses and keeps faithful Israel.” This conceptual idea appears repeatedly in the words of happiness, security, and peace which mark these psalms. The Hebrew word for “bless” (ברָּ) occurs eleven times.

5 Sifre § 27; Pesikta de Rav Kahana, 149a; Midrash on the Psalms, 74.2; Zohar, Shemot 173b-174a.
6 David C. Mitchell, The Songs of Ascents, pp. 5-6.
times in these fifteen short psalms. The word translated as “to
protect,” “to keep,” or “to guard (שָׁמַר),” occurs eleven times. The
key word shalom, which is often translated as “peace,” or “well-being”
(שָׁלוֹם) occurs seven times.7

The Psalms of Ascents share a range of “blessing responses”
that are not found in other psalms. In fact, of the fifteen songs, there
are only two (Psalms 120 and 123), that do not conclude with some
kind of blessing. All of this “blessing,” “keeping,” and “Shalom”
comes from one source, “Priestly Blessing” in the book of Numbers
6:24-26.8 The Psalms of Ascents share some other things in common
too, as they share a common love and longing for Jerusalem, its
temple, and the fortified hill of Zion. Everything revolves around this
geographical center. The Psalms here revolve around their common
interest in the kingship of the house of David. They tell one story and
they tell it with one tongue. That is, they share elements of
language, vocabulary, style and poetic technique that are not found
elsewhere in the other Psalms. There is a narrative line that runs

8 6:24 Yahweh bless you and keep you; 25 and Yahweh make his face to shine upon you, and show
favor to you; 26 Yahweh lift up his face upon you, and appoint to you peace (Shalom).
from the first psalm through to the last psalm. This story line has
long been recognized.\(^9\)

There are a number of structural patterns that are to be found
in the Psalms of Ascents. These patterns are not always apparent in
English, but they are very apparent, and very important, in the
Hebrew text for a number of reasons. One of the reasons that these
patterns are important is because they demonstrate the reliability of
the text we have before us today. These patterns were built into the
text when they were composed and if there were mistakes, additions,
or subtractions from the text then these patterns would be distorted,
or altered (cf. Scrolls from Qumran where at least portions of 13 of
the 15 Psalms are represented\(^10\)). Another thing that these patterns
demonstrate for us is the unity of these fifteen psalms, no more, no
less, only fifteen. This is a collection that was meant to be together
and there are clear indications in these patterns, of this fact.\(^11\) We
will not go into the details of the patterns, but they are readily


available with detailed explanation in the book by Mitchell cited previously.

There is a tradition within both Jewish and Christian traditions that interprets a text using a fourfold technique that investigates the “Plain” meaning, that which is a “Hint,” that which requires “Investigation,” and then the “Mystery.” In order to uncover the “mysteries” of the Psalms of Ascents, Numerology and Gematria were used. This type of technique was used primarily by those within Judaism known as Kabbalists. This is an esoteric method, discipline, school of thought, that originated within Judaism. Their intent was to explain the relationship between the unchanging, eternal, and mysterious infinity and the mortal and finite universe. While the techniques are used by some denominations within both Judaism and Christianity this is not a denomination in itself. The tradition entered into non-Jewish culture and began to be used by Christian Hebraists and Hermetic occultists. The documents found at Nag Hammadi are Hermetic occultist documents and this is a part of the tradition behind the more modern day Masonic Lodge.
I am not going to go into this type of interpretation, but this type of investigation is valuable in providing evidence of the reliability of the text that we have today, because this type of methodology will not yield results without a reliable text. Additionally, this type of investigation can provide important information about the background to the biblical texts. The name Jedidiah in all of its forms, that is woven through these Psalms, shows that King Solomon is central to the Psalms of Ascents. Thirdly, this type of interpretation yields its own perfectly plain and simple messages that help us to see relevant points in the text that would be harder for us to see otherwise, but once seen are plainly in the text. Finally, numerology presents a symbolic interpretation in its own right in that there is the clear message that Yahweh is mysterious and that effort is required on our part to understand the messages that he has for us in his word. From this type of study the assumption that this group of fifteen psalms is indeed a complete collection is confirmed and that it had something to do with King Solomon originally is also confirmed.\(^\text{12}\)

There has been, and still is some debate, as to the original intent of the Psalms of Ascents. Some, based on how they interpret that initial superscription (הַֽמַּ֫עֲלוֹת שִׁ֗יר — “song of ascents” or “song of steps”) believe that the Psalms are referring to steps such as the Temple steps in Jerusalem, while others see the term as more allegorical in the sense of a pilgrimage, while some posit that this is some form of musical notation. There is evidence within this collection that they were connected to pilgrimage to Jerusalem. For a start, the language of these Psalms is not entirely classical Hebrew, in other words they do not derive, in their current form, from Jerusalem, or central Israel. Jerusalem is their great theme, but it appears that these psalms were written in a Hebrew that was provincial, and for Israelites who loved Jerusalem and would come to visit their beloved city.\(^\text{13}\)

One might be reminded of the legislation which required the tribes of Israel to make pilgrimage to worship together three times a year.\(^\text{14}\) Ancient Israel had three feasts that were to be celebrated every year: they were the The Feast of Unleavened Bread, or


\(^\text{14}\) Exodus 23:14-17; 34:18-26; Leviticus 23:1-44; Numbers 28:16-29; Deuteronomy 16:1-17
Passover, that was held in the spring. The second was the Feast of Weeks, or *Shavuot*. It was held seven weeks after Passover, and also known as Pentecost. It was also sometimes referred to as the Feast of Firstfruits, or Reaping. The third feast, was in actuality, a season of feasts and fasts running from the beginning of the seventh month almost to the end of that month. It began on the first day of the seventh month with *Yom teruah*, or the Feast of Trumpets, marking the New Year Day of *Rosh Hashanah* and summoning Israel to repentance. On the tenth day of that month came *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement when the sins of the nation of Israel were atoned for by the High Priest of Israel. Finally, the Israelites went up to Jerusalem on the fifteenth of the month to celebrate the *Feast of Sukkot* also known as the Feast of Tabernacles. The feast lasted seven days and was followed by a solemn assembly on the eighth day. This was the greatest of all of Israel’s feasts and the sacrifices given at this feast were greater in both quantity and number than at all the other feasts. The week of Sukkot saw 182 sacrifices - 70 bullocks, 14 rams, 98 lambs. This number held powerful symbolism and equated to the number 26, the number associated with the
name of God, YHWH, multiplied by completion, or by the number seven.\textsuperscript{15}

There are good reasons for associating the Songs of Ascents with the Feast of Sukkot. First, this was the only festival celebrated regularly by the people throughout most of the kingdom period. This makes it then likely that any festal liturgy from kingdom times is most probably associated with this feast. Second, the Chronicler cites the fact that a song that was sung at Sukkot in Solomon’s time (2 Chronicles 6:41-42) and gives the words.\textsuperscript{16} Since these words appear to be virtually identical with those of Psalm 132:8-9 it would appear that the Chronicler is indeed indicating that this Song of Ascents was sung at Sukkot. Third, the Songs of Ascents abound in images related to harvest time. Psalm 126 has Autumn rains in the Negev desert and joyful reaping after tearful sowing. Psalm 128 has the happy man eating of the fruit of his labors amidst a family of fruitful vines and olive shoots. Psalm 129 has plowman and reapers. Psalm 132 has the Lord bless the people with abundant food. Psalm 133 has extra-_________________

\textsuperscript{15} David C. Mitchell, The Songs of Ascents, pp. 28-29.

\textsuperscript{16} 41 “Now rise up, O LORD God, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might. Let your priests, O LORD God, be clothed with salvation, and let your faithful rejoice in your goodness. 42 O LORD God, do not reject your anointed one. Remember your steadfast love for your servant David.” NRSV
virgin olive oil running from the head of the priest. Such images suit
the autumn feast better than the spring and summer festivals.

Finally, Psalm 134, the very last of the Psalms in this series addresses
the priests who stand ministering by night in the temple. We know of
only one night service in the temple and it happened during the feast
of Sukkot.¹⁷

We have records from the Mishnah (Sukkah 5.2-3) that
describe what happened during this festival and when it happened
(“at the end of the first festival day”¹⁸). The Mishnah then goes on to
make an explicit reference that appears to link exactly with the Songs
of Ascents. “5:4 A. The pious men and wonder workers would dance
before them with flaming torches in their hand,

B. and they would sing before them songs and praises.

C. And the Levites beyond counting played on harps, lyres,
cymbals, trumpets and [other] musical instruments,

D. [standing, as they played] on the fifteen steps which go
down from the Israelites court to the women’s court -

E. corresponding to the fifteen Songs of Ascents which are in the book of Psalms -

F. on these the Levites stand with their instruments and sing their song.”

So, as we can see there appears to be a clear link between the Songs of Ascents and the Feast of Sukkot. Because of this connection, some have suggested that these songs were a collection of traveling songs for the pilgrims going to that Feast. While this might look feasible for the first two Psalms it fails thereafter. Psalm 122 appears from the perspective of an observer looking at the city from within. A strong case can be made that the original point of reference for these songs is the fifteen steps in the temple where these songs were then to be sung. It is certain too, that at least when the Hebrew term רַקִּים לָעֹלָם is used in the plural, and pointed in

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19 Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah, A New Translation*, p. 289. The Mishnah is a six-part code of descriptive rules that was formulated sometime toward the end of the second century A.D. by a small number of Jewish patriarchs. It was put forward as the constitution of Judaism under the scholarship of Judah the Patriarch, the head of the Jewish community of Palestine at the end of the second century A.D. There are six divisions in the Mishnah, which are: 1. agricultural rules; 2. laws governing appointed seasons and festivals, which includes both sabbaths and festivals; 3. laws on the transfer of women and property from one man (her father) to another (her husband); 4. the system of civil and criminal law (what we today would term as “the legal system); 5. laws for the conduct of the cult of the Temple; 6. laws for the preservation of cultic purity, in both domestic (table and bed) and with regard to the temple. Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah, A New Translation*, p. XV.

this way, it means physical steps in most contexts (Isaiah 38:8; 2 Kings 20:9, 10, 11; and Nehemiah 12:32). It therefore seems most probable that some set of actual steps is meant by the superscription for these Psalms. Despite this evidence, the evidence from the Mishnah, the other evidence that we have considered that seems to relate these Psalms to Sukkot, Crow still believes the evidence is not strong enough to relate these Psalms to Sukkot or to a specific location in the temple.\textsuperscript{21}

Crow stands with the majority of recent scholars, and with the majority opinion of how these Psalms have been seen through much of history by those of the church, but despite this, Mitchell makes compelling arguments for how these Psalms would have been seen within early Judaism. Certainly, there is no way to use these Psalms as they were used in the temple today as the temple has been gone for more than 1900 years now. The Jews themselves have not used these Psalms in the temple for that period and yet they have continued to find these Psalms useful, inspiring, and meaningful.

Understanding the original usage and occasion for using these Psalms

\textsuperscript{21} Loren D. Crow, \textit{The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134) Their Place in Israelite History and Religion}, pp. 15-27.
help us to understand the context and provide passionate imagery to enrich our experience with these Psalms. To be certain, if we do not anchor these Psalms into a context the process of allegorization begins much earlier in the interpretive process. This then, makes it much more probable that our understanding will be further from the original intent rather than closer to it. The original intent, if linked to Sukkot, will have been associated with this great festival, and perhaps this series of festivals. This festival came at the culmination of the harvest when the blessings of God were not some esoteric possibility, but a patent reality and the fulfillment of the promise and blessings of God.

With the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 A. D., there was no longer a setting in the Temple for the Songs of Ascents to be used. Rather than passing from usage, the usage either moved to the secondary usage of pilgrimage Psalms, or they simply were used as pilgrimage Psalms as they had always been, either way, one would see that their usage as pilgrimage Psalms became the norm. Ancient and modern authors may be divided into several camps concerning the meaning of these songs. The majority of early Christians took
their cue from Philo of Alexandria and interpreted the superscript allegorically and related the Psalms to an individual’s ascent to God. This view has largely been abandoned by modern Christian authors with the exception of a few devotional books. Another ancient position that has gained more acceptance among modern authors is that the Psalms refer to the returning home of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. Another modern view is that the Psalms refer to a particular metrical, or poetic structure. The school that has the most modern adherents is the view that the superscript is a reference to the recurrent cultic reality of pilgrims returning to Jerusalem for the variety of festivals from foreign lands, or that it referred to the levitical steps in the Temple.  

It is my view that the usage by the Levitical priesthood in the Temple during Sukkot is the most reasonable explanation for the original usage of these Psalms. For the church however, that usage was closed off very early, and these beautiful, and powerful Psalms have served as pilgrimage Psalms describing the allegorical journey of disciples of Jesus in an allegorical fashion set against the backdrop of

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22 Loren D. Crow, *The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134) Their Place in Israelite History and Religion*, p. 3.
the initial reality of the Jewish context. Eugene Peterson, while recognizing that the original usage of these songs was not simply a spiritual journey toward discipleship and obedience has found that even in the physical journey undertaken by those traveling to the Jewish festivals there was in reality a spiritual journey that is still a part of the lives of those that would seek God.\textsuperscript{23}

As we journey on this pilgrimage I will endeavor to bring to bear historical, theological, and contextual information that adds depth and color to our journey together. I believe the richness of the original context brings that to bear for those who would undertake this pilgrimage. In a world where we expect travel to be quick, if not almost instant much has been lost in understanding the true nature of ancient travel, which was slow, arduous, and often dangerous. In that way it reflected far more adequately the nature of discipleship than our modern concepts of travel. There was much time for conversation, prayer, and the sharing of lessons learned along the way. If we will slow down, and carefully contemplate these ancient Hebrew poems today there is still much for us to discover about

ourselves and our God. Come let us journey together as we make our ascent toward the presence of God.
Synopsis

The Psalms of Ascents are fifteen psalms that are among some of the oldest poems in existence. They are poems that are filled with ancient expressions of passion, hope, jubilation, and great longing for relationship with God. These fifteen psalms are connected as a collection because of the superscription that comes at the beginning of each psalm and because they share many other commonalities. Understanding how the superscription relates to the these psalms has critical impact on how we interpret them. These fifteen psalms share much common language, such as their usage of the name of God (YHWH), a common theology, a general mood, and a level of serenity that is not common throughout the rest of the Psalms.

There is also within these psalms a connection with the priestly blessing given to the gathered people of Israel at times of their coming together before the high priest, especially on the Day of Atonement. These psalms share a desire for the “protection,” the “peace,” and the “keeping” of God in the lives of his people. There is a tremendous desire expressed in these psalms for a just and righteous kingship that is expressed in terms of David’s reign.
Understanding the original intent of the Psalms of Ascents can help enrich our understanding of these psalms and increase our comprehension of the hopes, and aspirations expressed in their words. To be certain, there is still much that is unclear about their original purpose, but the best estimate of their usage is that these Psalms were originally a part of the festival of Sukkot going back to the time of Solomon and were sung on the fifteen steps that were between the court of Israel and the court of women by the Levites. This was in many ways the most important of the festivals, and one in which expressions of gratitude and trust were expressed after the harvest when God had fulfilled his role caring for and blessing the people.

These psalms too, were likely sung by pilgrims traveling to these festivals in antiquity and they highlighted the importance of Jerusalem, the temple, hope in God, and the rule of God’s king in the lives of his people. After the destruction of the temple, rather than allowing these powerful and emotive psalms to pass from usage they took on a renewed role as they more allegorically came to represent the spiritual aspirations and hopes of both Jews and Christians down
through the centuries. Today they can still touch the depths of our soul’s desires, hopes and dreams as we read, contemplate and sing these ancient Hebrew poems. They still express the range of emotions toward God in powerful and moving ways. Come let us journey together toward the city and rule of God as we explore the message of these great psalms and seek his blessing.
Questions

1. When you think of Psalms what are some images that come to your mind?

2. What is the difference between psalms and songs?

3. What are some ways that poetry speaks to our heart in ways that are different from other forms of literature?

4. What are some ways that you express your emotions to God?

5. When you think of your faith, do you think of it in terms of a journey toward a destination, or a goal that you have already achieved? Explain.

6. Why do you think that God called his people in the Old Testament to gather for festivals three times per year? What is the purpose of gathering together?

7. What role does music serve in a person’s walk of faith?

8. What are some ways that emotions are expressed through music?

9. What are some ways that we perceive that God is merciful?

10. What are some ways that we perceive that God is just?

11. How do you reconcile the mercy and the justice of God in your mind?
12. What does it mean for God to bless a person?

13. Name some ways that God “protects,” “keeps,” or “guards,” his people?

14. When you think of understanding Scripture, what are some ways that you seek the “plain” meaning, the meaning that is a “hint,” that which “requires investigation,” and that which is a “mystery?”

15. What are some ways that praising God is of benefit?

16. How does recognizing the blessings of God aid in the progression of a person’s faith?

17. In what ways are there “steps” in our walk of faith?

18. Name some ways that allegory is a helpful conceptual tool for a walk of faith?