

Psalm 134

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[0 : 00] Welcome to all of you. I see some faces that don't look familiar, all of these psalms in this series are from the Psalms of Ascent.

So it might be helpful if you want to manage actually two books on your lap. You can do that, but I'll be preaching from the text that's on page 519 of your Bible. But we also said that Psalm 134 from the BCP.

And you'll notice one of the differences between the two is that the BCP actually has four verses and the ESV has three verses, but all the content's there.

So this psalm is a very short one. It's not the shortest psalm in the Psalter. But last week's text was Psalm 133.

It too was three verses, though this one is shorter than that one. And it's a part of these psalms that are called the Psalms of Ascent from 120 to 134.

[1 : 36] And they were most definitely used in a number of ways, but one of the ways that they were used was for the pilgrims as they were leaving their homes and on their way to Jerusalem for one of the three major feasts.

And there was a command, actually, that at least all the men of age would go to those three major feasts, being Passover and Pentecost and the Feast of Booths.

And the one that we look at today, while it's very short, it's both powerful and potent. And there's a lot of repetition in these verses, you may have noticed.

The Lord is mentioned five times here. A place, though by a different name, is mentioned three times. And the word bless is mentioned three times.

And bless is really the theme and the focus of this psalm. And, of course, it's a big theme in the Bible as well. The first time that blessing shows up is in Genesis 2, when we read, And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.

[2 : 52] In the Psalter, the first psalm begins like this. Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers.

Though that word bless is different than the one in Genesis and the one that we actually have here today. Psalm 134 is the final blessing of the Psalms of Ascent.

So this morning we look at this blessing that's expressed, I think, from two perspectives. One of them is actually from the bottom up, and the other one is actually from the top down.

So we've got the blessing from the bottom up and the blessing from the top down. So first of all, the blessing from the bottom up. One of them is when you read this, that you notice that there's actually someone who is doing this blessing.

The final psalm of Ascent starts with an invitation that's actually pretty mild in the ESV, but better rendered in the BCP.

[3 : 58] In the ESV we read there, Come, but it's actually behold. The pilgrims zealously or boldly call upon the servants of the Lord to bless the Lord in that first verse, the first line.

The servants of the Lord were in the temple leading worship during these festivals, other times as well. As I mentioned, Passover, Pentecost, and booze were the occasion to bless the Lord.

And this was probably the final gathering as the pilgrims were dismissed home, and the call to bless the Lord was the final act. Most people think, and I think that it's true, that the 14 verses were used on the way to Jerusalem for the festivals.

But there's good reason to believe that this last one was the one that was used at the very end of the festivals before the pilgrims went home as a kind of a dismissal.

But who were these servants of the Lord called to bless the Lord? The servants of the Lord in the temple were the priests and Levites, the clergy of the day, but also including everyone else there to celebrate the festivals.

[5 : 07] And on behalf of the Lord and the people of God, these servants blessed the Lord. And the direction of the blessing isn't down upon them at the beginning here, but it's upwards towards the Lord.

So today, the priesthood of all believers' purpose in life is upward to bless the Lord. Us bishops, priests, and deacons may be the clergy of the Anachron tradition, but the whole church now is the priesthood of all believers.

And all of us are servants called to bless the Lord. And every time we gather in God's name, here to proclaim, praise, pray, all Jesus' servants, bless him.

You're gathering here today as servants of the Lord bless him. So that's who's blessing the Lord, but when is the Lord blessed? This psalm tells us that the servants stand by night.

And we'll come back to the standing soon, but for now, just focus on by night. The servants of the Lord certainly bless the Lord morning, day, but also by night.

[6 : 17] And the time isn't exclusive tonight, but it is describing that in case the pilgrims think that the blessing just happens kind of from nine to five or sun up to sun down.

Now there's blessing that's actually going all the way around the clock. And especially this last night as they might have gathered and they were sent off to bless the Lord by night.

And I wonder, have you ever been to a synod? Maybe a conference, a seminar, or a retreat?

Leaders do a lot of planning before and serving during. And sometimes it's a sleepless job if you've ever done that.

And this psalm recognizes that blessing the Lord is that kind of work. One of Brenda's and my favorite seminars was an inter-varsity pastor seminar at Cedar Campus in the Upper Peninsula, Michigan.

Now the night before the final night was a talent night. It was fun, it was silly, quite humorous. And we started the seminar with worship and the preaching of God's word.

[7 : 23] But the final night was an all-in worship, all ages, of the preaching of the word and also with communion. It was a blessing right from the beginning, but there was nothing quite like the final night as we bless the Lord.

And of course, he blessed us. And then the next morning, the pilgrims coming from all over kind of North America, but in this case, all over that world, the Near Eastern world.

Some of them would go to bed that night, some of them wouldn't, but in the morning they would rise and return to their homes, having blessed the Lord. Well, where then do the servants bless the Lord?

The answer to this question may seem obvious since the pilgrims have traveled to Jerusalem. The answer is the servants bless God in the house of the Lord. In the house of the Lord or the temple is where the presence and the residence of the Lord was.

Like other Near Eastern religions, it was localized. So the servants locate themselves in the Lord's house to bless him. Now the presence of the Lord, though, is the other way around for us.

[8 : 38] Instead of the servants of the Lord going to the house of the Lord, though you may think of this as the house of the Lord, and that would be true, the Lord actually takes up residence in his servants.

First by Jesus becoming man, as he dwelt among us, and secondly by the sending of his Holy Spirit to dwell in us. And so the church has become the house of the Lord, and individually with our house of the Lord, where God takes up his residence as we bless him.

And finally, in this first section, then, how do the servants bless the Lord? Psalm 134 tells us the way we bless the Lord, or sort of.

All the Psalms give us the words to bless the Lord, from one all the way up to 50. And the Psalms of Ascent were the pilgrim worshippers' playlist. I'm sure you found the Psalms suited for many and almost all of the occasions of your life.

But Psalm 134 doesn't give us many words to bless the Lord other than to bless the Lord. But it does tell us something about the attitude to blessing.

[9 : 53] And at first, it looks like it's the posture for worship. Did you notice that? Look down, you read, who stand by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands to the holy place.

Standing and lifting hands are, of course, a posture. I don't think the psalmist is prescribing this posture more than just describing it. But it also isn't prohibiting this posture either.

We, of course, stand to bless the Lord when we sing and confess the creed. And notice that there are not many of us that lift our hands when we bless the Lord.

Although the priest, when they stand before you at the end and issue a blessing, do. Well, standing and lifting hands is not only a posture, but it also shows what's actually important to us.

And the first is about honoring and the second is about holiness. Standing in the presence of the Lord is a show of respect to God. When someone of authority comes in a room, you stand for them.

[11 : 02] So servants stand for the Lord. The second is about ascribing holiness to God. When the pilgrims lift up their hands, they aren't doing it for kind of a spiritual show.

They're not showing off, but signifying what sets the Lord apart from us. And makes Him the subject of praise and glory. Holiness is God's attribute of attributes.

And worshipers may show it by kneeling as we do, but also by lifting hands in the holy place. Lifted hands are a posture of then surrender, but also of reception.

And this blesses the Lord. And so this is the blessing from the bottom up. It is the blessing from the lesser, us, to the greater.

It is the worshipers who, like you may remember, shouted when Jesus was on the road to Jerusalem as He rode a donkey. Hosanna to the Son of David.

[12 : 07] Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest. blessed. John the Baptist didn't use the word blessed specifically when he saw Jesus, though the first words out of his mouth were, the first word in this psalm, behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

That was certainly a blessing too. And heaven is all about, and our worship here is all about, blessing the Lord and His honor and His glory and His goodness and His grace.

And this is the blessing from the bottom up. But verse 3 or verse 4 in your BCP shows us then this blessing from the top down.

So let's look at that blessing. This is more likely what you think of when you hear the word blessing, isn't it?

About two-thirds of the psalms, the word blessed is used from the bottom up. And one-third of them is about from the top down.

[13 : 17] There are about a hundred times that the word bless or blessed is used in the Psalter. But here we are with this word blessed from the top down, but it's not the first time that it's actually used in the Psalms of Ascent.

If you look over just one page at the bottom, 128 verse 5, you'll see there the Lord bless you from Zion.

The same one in verse 134, verse 3, may the Lord bless you from Zion. Added to that, He who made heaven and earth.

And the blessings are for God, but only because they are from God. And we bless God because God first blesses us.

And we are blessed to be a blessing. And we learn of the blessings source in this third verse of the psalm. At first, it may look like the source of the blessing is Zion.

[14 : 21] Zion is that holy city placed on a hill called Jerusalem. And if you've ever been there, you know what a special place that is, though a conflicted one. And there are other places worth maybe putting on your places to visit, but this one is a really, really important one.

But Zion and Jerusalem is only worth it because it's from that place that the Lord blesses you and me and us. And the source of blessing isn't the place, though it's really, really important, but it's the person.

It's the Lord who does the blessing and he does so with his word. And that's what's so important. And the Lord can bless us with just about anything, mostly his word and his presence, but he loses no opportunity to use anything to bless us.

Just consider the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit and those who mourn. Blessed are the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful and the pure in heart.

And blessed are the peacemakers and those who are persecuted. It seems like there are almost no limits and often surprises in the way this blessing comes down from God upon us.

[15 : 43] And of course, the Lord isn't limited because the psalm ends with the words the one who made heaven and earth.

That is, the creator of heaven and earth and all that is therein can make anything a blessing. Last night, some of you may have participated in the Honda celebration of light.

I could see it as I drove down across the North Shore from Squamish. And if you were there, you probably had a better seat than I did. But think of the permanence of the lights in heaven that we now call space that God has created.

The creator of heaven and earth. This is the one who blesses us from heaven to earth. The Lord's blessing is permanent and powerful.

The blessing is purposeful and peaceful. And the blessing of the Lord to conclude and dismiss the pilgrims was full of his presence as this blessing was pronounced.

[16 : 51] And it's really likely that it was the same blessing that was pronounced upon us as Anglicans, not at the communion service, but our morning or evening prayer.

If you turn to your Bible in Numbers chapter 6 verses 22, you would read this. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to Aaron and his son saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel. You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with his countenance and give you his peace.

So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel and I will bless them. This is likely the blessing that the leaders used with this Psalm 134 as they dismissed the people to return home.

The last word in their ears and on their hearts was this blessing. This is what sets Christians apart from all other religions. There are other things that set us apart too, but it's this verbal, this audible blessing of God upon his people.

[18 : 11] It is a celebration of the light of the Lord's holiness come upon us from above and in peace. So from Zion the Lord blessed his people.

The Aaronic blessing was and is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It was in Jerusalem and from Jesus that he taught and fought for peace, not violently, but struggled for it.

wrestled with it. Jesus blessed the people with his message and his miracles from Jerusalem. And from Zion the Lord died. He rose again.

He ascended into heaven, the place that he made and prepared for us. So this is the blessing from below, but this is then the blessing from above.

in closing, just one simple thing. The exhortation of this psalm is to come at the beginning or to look or to perceive or as the BCP renders it very well, behold, see it, hold it, grasp onto it.

[19 : 20] And so captured by God's grace and captivated by his mercy, we are called to come and bless the Lord, come and receive the blessing from the Lord, but also, I think, compelled to give his blessing by his word and with his deeds to one another and in this world in which we live.

Brothers and sisters, let's bless the Lord as he has blessed us. I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.