

Psalm 134

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[0 : 00] Pray with me as we stand. Father God, we pray that you would open our hearts to receive your word this morning. In Christ we ask. Amen.

! Please be seated. Well, friends, good morning. My name is Jacob Vandiver. If I haven't had a chance to meet you, I'd love to meet you after the service.

Open your Bibles with me back to Psalm 134. It's on page 519 of the Pew Bible, Psalm 134. If you've been with us, you know that we've been in a short sermon series looking at the Psalms of Ascent.

The Psalms of Ascent, that's Psalms 120 through 134. These are special psalms. They were psalms that were sung by God's people on their way up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Holy Days throughout the year.

In the temple at Jerusalem, that was the place of God's most intense and particular presence. And so it was a place of pilgrimage.

[1 : 16] Now, like you do when you're preparing for a sermon, you just look some words up on the internet. And I looked up this word pilgrimage this week and I found probably what is the most anemic definition of pilgrimage that I've ever read.

I just want to read it for you. A pilgrimage, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is a journey to a place associated with someone or something well known or respected.

Isn't that the most pitiful definition of pilgrimage? A pilgrimage is a journey to meet God.

That's what a pilgrimage is. And that's why the Jewish people were traveling up to Jerusalem. It was to meet God in the place of His most particular and intense presence.

Psalm 134 is the last song in this collection they were singing as they were traveling up. And it represents the climax, the goal of the pilgrim's journey.

[2 : 32] So right here at the beginning of the sermon, I just want to tell you what the main point of this sermon is. So here it is. The goal of the pilgrim's journey.

What every person is made for is to be in a personal relationship with the living God in which we bless Him and He blesses us.

That's it. That's what Psalm 134 is pointing us toward. St. Augustine, who was a bishop in the 4th century, famously prayed in his confessions, Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, O Lord.

And Psalm 134 shows us where that yearning of our heart is carrying us to. And it's to the heavenly throne room where we bless God and we receive His blessing.

That's what our hearts are aiming at. And we'll talk about what that means, what it is that we bless God. It's a hard question to answer. Okay.

[3 : 50] But you might ask, how does Psalm 134 show us this? You might say, Jacob, this is three verses. Aren't you reading into this a lot?

Well, I'm not. And it's because this is a liturgy. Psalm 134 is a liturgy. It's a call and response.

And we know what that is here at St. John's, right? So if I say, lift up your hearts? Good. I'm glad that worked. Same thing with Psalm 134.

It's a call and response. Look with me. Verses 1 and 2 are the call. It says, come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord. Lift up your hands and bless the Lord.

And the response is verse 3, may the Lord bless you. This is an ancient liturgy that the Jewish people used at the climax of their pilgrimage.

[4 : 53] And good liturgies, they're like theology concentrate. You just add water and you get a whole beautiful, delectable soup.

I thought of a few of these this week, so let me give you one more. Liturgies are like a protein ball. It's bite-sized. It's small, but it's packed with nutrients.

Or if you like, liturgies are like vitamins that are packed full of the nutrients that we need to be physically healthy. And a good liturgy like Psalm 134 is packed full of God's Word, the nutrients that we need for spiritual health.

So for the rest of our time, what I want to do is just crack into Psalm 134 and see what it's teaching us. So here we go. We're just going to go line by line.

So look with me. Verse 1. Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord. So who is a servant? Who is a servant of the Lord?

[5 : 59] And the scholarship on this is pretty well divided right down the middle. In the original context, it either meant the priests that were working in the temple, or maybe it meant the whole congregation of pilgrims who were coming up to Jerusalem.

And we just can't be sure. But what's important is that a servant of the Lord is any person who is in a covenant relationship with God.

That's what it means. It's a person who has given up their autonomy. A person who says to the Lord, I am yours.

No longer my will, but thy will be done. That's a servant of the Lord. A servant is not a person who is shopping around for religious options.

A servant has taken the plunge. The servant belongs to the Lord and serves him in every aspect of life. Look with me again.

[7 : 09] Verse 1. The servant stands by night in the house of the Lord. And this means that the person is ready to attend to the Lord at any time, any moment, night or day.

The servant is the person who is poised and prepared to act on behalf of the king. He's prepared to obey the Lord's command even at the drop of a hat.

That's what it means to stand by night. And the servant serves even at the most inconvenient times. In the middle of the night.

This is like when you're in a wicked rush after the service on a Sunday and you want to just dart out the back because you have an appointment to get to. But you see someone on the way and they need prayer.

The servant is ready to serve even when it's inconvenient. Or for you parents, when you're exhausted from a long day at work and you just need the kids to be asleep.

[8 : 18] And your five-year-old wants to have a deep theological conversation about the nature of hell and judgment at 10 o'clock at night. A servant is ready to serve.

He stands by night. And he's committed to God. That's what a servant is. So let's keep going. These servants of the Lord, what are they to do?

They are to bless God. And you might think that doesn't sound quite right. Like Susan was saying, it's kind of strange.

God blesses us, right? We don't bless him. I actually mentioned this to a friend this week who I was talking to about this sermon. And he said, wait a second, we don't bless God.

I'm really uncomfortable with that language. And some translations pick up on this weirdness and they change it. The NIV, for instance, changes it to say, come praise the Lord.

[9 : 26] And that's not wrong. It is praise. But I don't think it's sufficient. Because there is a Hebrew word for praise. If you look down at Psalm 135, you see the first verse.

It says, praise the Lord. But that's a different word in Hebrew than what we have in Psalm 134. Here in 134, the word bless is intentional.

And it's the same three times in each verse. You bless the Lord. You bless the Lord. The Lord bless you. It's the same word three times.

It's barak in my very broken Hebrew. So what's going on here? To get it, I think we need to know a little bit about how the Bible uses this word barak.

And in Scripture, most of the time, this word is used when it's talking about God's blessedness. His barakness. That's something He possesses.

[10 : 35] His attribute. His character. His property. His blessedness. So that when the Bible talks about God blessing us, it's all about Him sharing some, something of His barakness with us.

He baraks some of His barakness to us. And if there are any Hebrew scholars in the congregation, please forgive me.

We can talk afterwards and you can correct me. Now, in the Bible, God's blessedness, His barakness has everything to do with His goodness.

His goodness. His life-giving, overabundant goodness. In fact, the first time we see this word is in Genesis, right at the beginning. Where God baraks His creation.

He blesses what He's made. And He says, be fruitful and multiply. God comes down into His creation.

[11 : 45] And He gives His goodness. And He says, take part. And go and be my creation.

With my blessedness. The blessing of life comes from God. Or in the story of the flood, after Noah and his family are saved from the floodwaters, God again baraks Noah.

And He says, go and be fruitful and multiply. Take my blessedness, Noah, and live.

And in return, Noah baraks the Lord. He says, blessed be the Lord. So what's happening here? When Noah blesses the Lord, what he's doing is he's recognizing and appreciating God's goodness and His mercy.

His goodness to give life. His mercy to save from the floodwaters. That's what it is when Noah blesses the Lord.

[13 : 00] Okay. So getting back to Psalm 134. How do we bless the Lord? Well, it's just like with Noah.

We bless the Lord when we acknowledge and appreciate His goodness towards us. To bless the Lord is to say, God, I recognize you are the author of life.

I need you. I'm not self-sufficient. I need you, God, to make me what I am not. I need you, God, to give me what I don't have.

This word barak has the idea of breaking down in it. We bless God when we come to the Lord with broken spirits.

Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And what it means is that we bless God when we come to Him in neediness.

[14 : 07] And you see this pictured for us in verse 2. Look. It says, lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord.

This evokes the image of a child. What does a child do when they fall and scrape their knee? They run to their parent.

They run to their safe place and they lift up their arms. And they say, I need you. Give me what I don't have. Be for me what I can't be for myself.

And this is the Bible's picture of repentance and faith. And when we come to God in repentance and faith, it blesses God.

Not because we have something that we can give to Him, but because our repentance and our faith glorify Him. It shows both to us and to the world that we are dependent on Him.

[15 : 18] And God, when we do this, is delighted. And He's delighted because He knows that when we do it, it satisfies the desires of our heart and makes us fully ourselves.

And that's what God wants for us. So when we come to the Lord with our repentance and our faith, what happens? God blesses us.

So this word barak, it literally means to kneel down. That's what it literally means. So stay with this image of the child who's lifting his arms up to the parent.

What's the natural response of a parent who sees the hurt child coming to them with arms lifted up? He stoops down.

We stoop and we embrace and we comfort and we lift up and we hold. And so it is with God. He blesses us.

[16 : 26] He stoops down to offer the blessing of His presence face-to-face, on our level, so that we can experience His goodness and His mercy and His love.

So do you see the double motion of blessing? We bless God with repentance and faith. And then God blesses us by giving us Himself.

Okay. So like I said, this is a liturgy. It's a call to worship. And so just because of the rhetoric of it, it puts our coming to bless God in the first place, because it's a call to worship.

But of course, God blessing us is the primary thing. And the blessing is asymmetrical, right? You see, we only can come to bless God because the Lord has blessed us with His life and with His presence.

It's the reason we have breath in our lungs. The prayer for God to bless us in verse 3 is basically, may the power and goodness that you have already acknowledged as you bless the Lord.

[17 : 49] May that power and goodness that you've acknowledged as already being there, as being the source of your life, as being the thing that you need, may that power and goodness come and rest upon you.

But when we do this, this exchange of blessing with God, it's not like a power grab. It's not so that we would get some spiritual divine energy.

It isn't magical. It's not mechanical. It's not something you can just conjure up. It's relational. The blessing of God that we receive comes as a byproduct of our relationship of gratitude with the living God.

So you can't instrumentalize it. You have to actually have the relationship. And just the last thing before we're done.

Where does Psalm 134 say that this blessing comes from? Well, verse 3, look with me. It says the blessing comes from Zion.

[19 : 06] The Lord will bless you from Zion. And Zion meant the temple at Jerusalem, the place of God's particular presence. It's where the Ark of the Covenant was.

And the Ark held the tablets of stone which had God's word upon them. It's where God's presence was locally found. But you may know that the temple was destroyed.

It doesn't exist anymore. The Ark is lost. So where is God's presence to be found?

Well, when Jesus Christ died on the cross, the gospel writers tell us that the veil in the temple that was separating off the holy place, it was torn from top to bottom.

And they tell us that because when Jesus died on the cross, the barrier to our experiencing God, that local distance that we have from God, is abolished.

[20 : 23] It is not this way anymore. God's presence is no longer there. Because of Jesus' sacrifice, we are all invited into the holiest of holies to know God up close and personal.

Why? It's because Jesus himself, he is the place of God's most particular and intense presence.

So brothers and sisters, we are on a pilgrimage. But we're on a pilgrimage to know Jesus more fully. The letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament was written to Jewish pilgrims.

Pilgrims that had found Jesus Christ and believed in him to be the true Messiah. And listen, the writer says to them, your pilgrimage has not led you to the place of God's presence such as it was in the Old Covenant.

But no, it has led you to the place of true Mount Zion. It has led you to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem.

[21 : 50] It has led you to the church, to the gathering of God's people who are born again by the Holy Spirit, who are ruled by Jesus in a new covenant established in his blood.

That is the true Mount Zion. And this is what that means. That the place where we experience God's blessing is not a static location.

It's not an institution. It's not a building. It's anywhere where God's people are gathered together, where God's word is proclaimed and his sacraments are celebrated.

That is the true Mount Zion from which God will bless you. And friends, just as I close out, since Aaron and Chris the past few weeks have paid homage to David, our previous rector, it feels appropriate that I would do the same.

David liked to say to us preachers that we should be more interested in the implications of the text rather than the application of the text. So I just want to offer three implications of this.

[23 : 07] So for the new Christian, or the person who is on the pilgrimage, at the beginning of the pilgrimage, Psalm 134 means that the goal of your life is to know and to love God personally.

And we know God personally through Jesus Christ. So join the church. Not because it is perfect, I can assure you, but because it is the particular place where you will come into contact with Jesus.

It's where you will get to know him. And knowing and obeying Jesus as Lord is the only way to satisfy the desires of your heart. So this call to worship is for you.

Come and know true life. For those of us who are well along the journey, bless the Lord means breaking down the walls that inevitably get built up around our hearts.

Blessing the Lord means pouring out our heart to God over and over again, lifting up our arms to him like needy children. He knows what you need.

[24 : 29] He is present with you in all suffering. He wants to give you a full and peace-filled life beyond what you can imagine. So bless the Lord with your repentance and your faith.

He wants to give himself to you. And last, for us as a church community, for St. John's in this time of transition, we are seeking God's blessing for our future.

So let's bless the Lord as a community. And what that means is recognizing our neediness before him. For a new rector. For ongoing life in our community.

For a new building for our church to meet in. For our continued commitment to gospel ministry in Vancouver. The Lord has to build these things.

We can't do it. And St. John's has not been a blessed congregation for the past hundred years because of all the wits and the smarts and the beauty and the intelligence of the people here.

[25 : 45] As true as all that may be. St. John's has been blessed because the Lord has been present. He's blessed us because this church has been filled with people whose main priority in life is to bless God.

So let's keep doing that. Amen.