

Every third psalm has drawn special attention to the blessing of Mount Zion. We have celebrated the peace, justice, prosperity, and contentment of Mount Zion. Therefore it is fitting that the Psalms of Ascents conclude on a final note of unceasing praise emanating from the Jerusalem Temple. The protocol of praise is twenty-four seven, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. As the psalms remind us there is never a poor time to praise the Lord: “I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips” (Ps 34:1). Psalm 134 is a reminder to praise the Lord moment by moment, day or night. Most commentators envision priests working the night-shift in the Temple. While the city sleeps the priests continue to praise the Lord.

Luke refers to the prophet, Anna, the eight-four year old widow, who never left the temple. She worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. When Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple, she was right there. Anna was led by the Spirit of God to recognize the Christ child. “Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38).

Psalm 134 corresponds well to the apostle Paul’s concluding admonition to the church at Thessalonica. Paul asked “brothers and sisters to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.” He went on to say, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:12-13, 16-18).

With the special feast days over, it was time for the pilgrims to return home. Spurgeon imagined pilgrims setting out on their long journey home at the break of day. But before they departed they requested one final blessing from the night-shift priests. “The retiring pilgrims stir up the holy brotherhood of those who are appointed to keep the watch of the house of the Lord. Let them look around them upon the holy place, and everywhere ‘behold’ reasons for sacred praise.”¹ If Spurgeon is right the final act before leaving Jerusalem at sunrise was a praise service.

If we envision ourselves returning to the harsh conditions of Meshek or Kedar or some place inbetween (Ps 120) we know we need the blessing of God. We long for the Lord to enter into our need and respond to our distress with his deliverance – his blessing. This longing does not stop as we reverse our steps and travel back to our daily routine. Pilgrimage in reverse is just as important as the pilgrim advance toward Jerusalem. It is easy to think of the pilgrims singing and praying the Psalms of Ascents as they traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate covenant and community, but not so easy to pray and sing on the return journey.

A Call to Bless

*Praise the Lord [Behold, Bless the Lord], all you servants of the Lord
who minister by night in the house of the Lord.
Lift up your hands in the sanctuary*

¹ Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Ps 134.

and praise [bless] the Lord.
Psalm 134:1-2

How can we who are needy and sinful bless the Lord who is all-sufficient, the Maker of heaven and earth? Truly, we can add absolutely nothing to God. The Lord is not in anyway needy for praise. It is we who stand in total need of God's blessing. Our self-sufficiency is in every way a myth. The Lord God's all-sufficiency is in every way absolute. We need the Lord's blessing to meet our needs, but when we bless the Lord we humbly acknowledge and reverently bow before his glorious, life-giving presence. Some translators have exchanged "praise" for "bless" to distinguish the Lord's blessing of us to meet our needs and our blessing of the Lord to worship him. While the distinction is important, the biblical text insists on using "bless" to describe our action toward God and God's action towards us. The word "bless" is the keynote of the psalm but the exchange, notes Derek Kidner, "is quite unequal: to bless God is to acknowledge gratefully what He is; but to bless man, God must make of him what he is not, and give him what he has not."²

"Behold, bless the Lord," is a call to worship, a call to bend the knee, to stand in awe, to lift our hands in praise, and to exalt in the name of our God. Worship is simply telling the truth about God, who God is and what God has done. "To bless the Lord, therefore, is to call to mind the glorious things he has revealed about himself, as well as the glorious things he has done, and to bring ourselves low, to kneel, in worship and adoration. This is the climax of pilgrimage."³

Who are these "servants" who are called to bless the Lord? The context of the psalm indicates Levitical priests and singers (1 Chron 9:33; 23:30), but the term for "servants" can be used for "worshippers in general."⁴ The psalmist was most likely referring to priests from the tribe of Levi, but by using the more general word for worshippers (Ps 135:1) the psalmist opens up the meaning of the psalm for Christians today to the possibility of the priesthood of all believers. Christ's followers "have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way" (Heb 10:19-20). We do not worship vicariously through an ordained group of pastors. We do not look to a pastor for the feeling of reassurance that the Christ-life is being lived out. The pastor is not a surrogate living the life of faith on our behalf. The pastor does not pray in our place or worship for us. We are all called to worship the Lord "in the Spirit and in truth, for [we] are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks" (John 4:23).

The challenge to the Levites to lead in worship was perceived by Calvin as a gentle rebuke aimed at those priests who felt they had met their responsibility when they executed their liturgical and ritual requirements. "The psalmist would show that merely to keep nightly watch over the Temple, kindle the lamps, and superintend the sacrifices, was of no importance, unless they served God spiritually, and referred all outward ceremonies to that which must be considered the main sacrifice – the celebration of God's praises."⁵

² Kidner, Psalms, 454.

³ Motyer, Journey, 147.

⁴ Ross, Psalms, 756.

⁵ Calvin, Psalms, 168.

The call to “lift up your hands in the sanctuary” is a call to enter into worship with our whole being, not only body, mind, and soul, but with all the emotional baggage and heart ache that we carry around with us. The invitation is to the whole person. We are not asked if we feel like worship; we are commanded to worship. Athletes tend to do this better than worshipers. They put their whole bodies into what they are doing. We were meant to exercise our soul when we kneel, stand, lift up our voice, and lift up our hands. If we only worshiped when we felt like it, when we were in the mood, we would worship far less. But worship is not subject to our whims. We are commanded to worship. The invitation is an imperative, calling our whole being before God. We were not meant to feel our way into worship but worship our way into feelings. Body language modifies our behavior and allows our souls to catch up where they need to be – in reverential awe before the Holy One in the sanctuary.⁶

A Priestly Benediction

*May the Lord bless you from Zion,
he who is the Maker of heaven and earth.*

Psalm 134:3

Having blessed the Lord (Ps 134:1,2), the psalmist turns his attention to the Lord’s blessing of the people. The priestly blessing is in the tradition of Aaron, Israel’s first High Priest. The Lord gave Moses specific directions: “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.’” The source of the blessing is the Maker of heaven and earth and the blessing comes from Zion. Through the coming of Jesus Christ we have a far deeper, richer understanding of the Maker of heaven and earth. We cannot speak of our Creator without thinking of our Redeemer.

The apostle Paul wrote, “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. . . .He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . .For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col 1:15-20). Christians today cannot think of the blessing of Jerusalem without rejoicing in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of grace. We bless the Lord because we have received the blessing of God: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph 1:3-4).

We have discussed the importance of Zion as the place where Israelites could go and be blessed in Psalm 14. Zion, the City of David, is the *place* from which salvation comes. Zion as a *place* “formed the nucleus for a rich gathering of images, symbols, promises, and visions that express God’s sovereign purposes worked out on the hard, inhospitable ground of our lives.”⁷ Until Jesus Christ came *place* rather than *person* summed up the meaning of God’s presence. But when the

⁶ Motyer, Journey, 148. Motyer writes: “The word ‘sanctuary’ in the Old Testament does not have the meaning ‘a place of safety’, in the sense in which we use it now, but always ‘a place of holiness’, and, very frequently, the simple noun ‘holiness’ is used.”

⁷ Peterson, Leap Over the Wall, 133.

Incarnate One came he fulfilled and embodied everything about salvation. For “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). “The physical territory of Jewish Palestine is nowhere referred to with any theological significance in the New Testament. The land as a holy place has ceased to have relevance. . . Furthermore, the geographical land of Israel has no place in New Testament teaching regarding the ultimate future of God’s people.”⁸ Instead of the holiness of *place*, “Christianity has fundamentally. . .substituted the holiness of the *Person*: it has Christified holy space.”⁹

⁸ Chris Wright, *An Eye for An Eye*, IVP, 1983, 93.

⁹ W. D. Davis, *The Gospel and the Land*, 368. Quoted in Wright, *An Eye for An Eye*, 93.