

The Psalms of the Great Ascent (Psalms 120-134) end on a note of praise. Psalm 134 works as both a conclusion to the psalms of ascents and as an introduction to the Great Hallel psalms. Having journeyed from all over Israel to Jerusalem, the pilgrims now head back home. I hesitate to say that they are bound for home, because Zion is their true home and the gathering in Jerusalem is a high point to their worship and family life. Having prayed and sung their way to Jerusalem, they will pray and sing their way back to their ordinary routines and daily labor. The centering reality of worship, with its spiritual disciplines of repentance, sacrifice, thanksgiving, prayer, and praise are juxtaposed with the challenges of making a living, shepherding sheep and cattle, harvesting wheat and barley, pressing olives, tending vines, building homes, digging wells, and weaving cloth. The festival reunions are over and it's back to the daily grind. But these pilgrims are changed and renewed. They are not as they were; they are transformed. They have added another spiritual growth ring to their life with God. They are returning to their homes and farms, stronger and wiser than they came.

The setting of Psalm 134 captures the early morning mood of the pilgrims as they head out, thanking the Levites for their service and praising “the Maker of heaven and earth” as they go. Psalm 135 develops these themes and helps set the tone and agenda for the psalms to follow. The Psalms of the Great Ascent finish and the Psalms of the Great Hallel commence. Jesus’ prayer book carries you to Jerusalem on a melody of deep meaning and then brings you back home with songs of praise. This coming and going is vital to the people of God. True spirituality does not end with the end of the Feast days. The return journey down home is just as important as the journey up to Jerusalem. The general tenor the Great Hallel Psalms guide the returning pilgrims in praise and gratitude, in resilience and endurance. The drum beat of praise pulsates through Psalms 135-150, but true to the character of the Psalms such praise issues out of the depths of pain and the yearning for the very presence of God.

### *Call to Praise*

*Praise the Lord [Hallelujah!]  
Praise the name of the Lord;  
praise him, you servants of the Lord,  
you who minister in the house of the Lord,  
in the courts of the house of our God.  
Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good;  
sing praise to his name, for that is pleasant.*

Psalm 135:1-3

The psalmist’s “Hallelujah” chorus pervades our coming and going. Vigorous, knowledgeable praise frames not only the psalm but our lives. Psalm 135 begins and ends with a call to praise and in between celebrates the reason for praise and critiques the alternative to praise – idolatry. The psalm is a mosaic of Scripture fragments drawn from the Psalms, the Law, and the Prophets. The poet-psalmist aims for impact, not originality. He crafts the psalm in such a way as to gather up the fullness of the Word of God so as to bring it to bear on the today’s experience of devotion

and daily life. To praise the name of the Lord is to praise everything about the Lord – who he is and what he has done. Yahweh’s actions and character are worthy of all praise. The Name is short-hand notation for the fullness of God, even as “servants of the Lord” refers to all the people of God, past, present, and future, and not just the official priests. We are called to praise, not to debate or critique or sit in judgment. The psalmist speaks to our skeptical mind and our troubled heart and says, “Praise the Lord.” His message is clear, begin with doxology, not doubt. Rather than a cool empathy with the cynic, let the skeptic witness the genuineness of your worship. Worship your way into feelings for God; don’t feel your way into worship. We set aside our self-preoccupation in order to make room for adoration and praise. Spurgeon wrote, “We ought to be always at it; answering to the command here given—Praise, Praise, Praise. Let the Three-in-one have the praises of our spirit, soul, and body. For the past, the present, and the future, let us render threefold hallelujahs.”<sup>1</sup> Our praise neither adds nor subtracts from the Lord who is above all, “the unchangeable One.” He is neither greater if we praise him nor less if we reproach him.<sup>2</sup>

True worship leaders follow the example of the psalmist. They refuse to call attention to themselves. They do not worship for the sake of others, as if the congregation is vicariously worshipping through them. They are servants of Yahweh. In the first instance they are not musicians or artists, much less performers or professionals. They are servants worshipping with other servants. Praise is not a matter of technique or hype, but a declaration of who the Lord is and what he has done. We seem to forget so easily that praise is not a performance show casing our talent. Calvin warns against a “misguided zeal” that motivates “too many” to spend time and energy on “trifles.” They weary “themselves with ridiculous attempts to invent additions to the service of God,” while they neglect what is most important.<sup>3</sup>

In the tension between the unadorned altar (Exod 20:22-26) and the golden calf (Exod 32:1-35) we are tempted to give up and give people what they want. We may call it “a festival to the Lord” (Exod 32:5) but it amounts to idolatry. Whether the musical style is classical or contemporary the impulse to entertain and impress is very real. Praise is the antidote to tailoring the gospel to meet consumer demand. We cannot praise the Lord and cater to self-interest, self-centeredness, and self-justification.

The returning pilgrims have just come from a rich time of praise in the house of the Lord. Augustine picks up on this household language and asks, “Is it a small benefit, that we stand in the house of the Lord?” How can we be anything but thankful? We used to stand on the outside, but now we stand within. And we have nothing to repay God for such great benefits other than praise and thanksgiving. The gospel of Jesus Christ, prefigured in Israel’s salvation history, makes it possible for us to stand in the household of faith. “It belongs to the very act of thanksgiving,” writes Augustine, “to ‘receive the cup of the Lord, and to call upon His name.’”<sup>4</sup> His Eucharistic interpretation hints at how Jesus himself might have prayed this psalm. Everything celebrated in this psalm, Yahweh’s election of Jacob, his sovereignty over creation and history, his over-powering plagues of judgment, and his conquest of Canaan, all depend

<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, Psalm 135, Treasury of the Psalms.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, Psalm 135, 624.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, Psalms, vol. 5:171.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, Psalm 135, 624 (Ps 116:13).

ultimately on who Jesus is and what Jesus did and will do. His Name, “the name that is above every name” (Phil 2:9) is the name of the Lord to be praised. We cannot think of the Israelite standing in the courts of the house of God without praising the Lord for we who were “once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” We are “no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household. . .” (Eph 2:13, 19).<sup>5</sup>

*Reason for Praise*

*For the Lord has chosen Jacob to be his own,  
Israel to be his treasured possession.  
I know that the Lord is great,  
that our Lord is greater than all gods.  
The Lord does whatever pleases him,  
in the heavens and on the earth,  
in the seas and all their depths.  
He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth;  
he sends lightning with the rain  
and brings out the wind from his storehouses.  
He struck down the firstborn of Egypt,  
the firstborn of people and animals.  
He sent his signs and wonders into your midst, Egypt,  
against Pharaoh and all his servants.  
He struck down many nations  
and killed mighty kings –  
Sihon king of the Amorites,  
Og king of Bashan, and all the kings of Canaan –  
and he gave their land as an inheritance,  
an inheritance to his people Israel.  
Your name, Lord, endures forever,  
your renown, Lord, through all generations.  
For the Lord will vindicate his people  
and have compassion on his servants.*

Psalm 135:8-14

The reason for praise begins with the Lord’s sovereign election of his people: “the Lord has chosen Jacob to be his own.” Rather than perceiving election as an unacceptable intellectual dilemma or a burden of conscience, the psalmist sees being chosen as a cause for great rejoicing. The opposite of being chosen is the horror of abandonment. There is no hint in this dynamic action of anything other than the grace and mercy of God. To be included – to be chosen – is to be privileged as God’s treasured possession (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; Mal 3:17; Ps 114:2).

---

<sup>5</sup> Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 57. With the literary care of a poet, Paul orchestrated a word play on the Greek word for “house” (οἶκος). In Christ we are no longer *aliens* (ἄλλοτριχοι), but members of God’s *household* (οἰκεῖοι), *built on* (ἐποικοδομηθέντες) a sure foundation, and the *building* (οἰκοδομή) is *built together* (συνοικοδομεῖσθε) into a *dwelling place* (κατοικητήριον) of God. Paul’s intentional selection of the household of faith language underscores the relational nature of the church (see Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 137).

The divine decision has nothing to do with Jacob meriting or deserving God's favor. There is no way human rights or initiative could be so construed as to leverage God's favor. This choosing is all of God's doing for the sake of the redemption of the world.

The psalmist accepts the fact of election as grounds for praise without attempting to justify the divine decision. Jesus says much the same thing to the grumbling crowd at the feeding of the more than five thousand, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day" (John 6:44). To his disciples, Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit. . ." (John 15:16). In his letter to the church at Ephesus, the apostle Paul may have Psalm 135 in mind when he gives the reason for praise. His opening eulogy begins,

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love, he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ. . . . In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity to the purposes of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:3-12).

The psalmist rests in the most profound truth, Israel is God's treasured possession, even as the followers of Jesus Christ rest in this same truth. The apostle Peter used the same language to draw on this reality, when he wrote, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession (Exod 19:5; Ps 135:4), that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:9-10).

Secure in the knowledge that the Lord had chosen Jacob, the psalmist confidently declares, "I know the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods." His words echo Jethro the father-in-law of Moses "who was delighted to hear about all the good things the Lord has done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians" (Exod 18:9-11). But the psalmist does not begin with the Exodus, he begins with creation. "The Lord does whatever pleases him." He has no limitations other than his pleasure. His will is sovereign over the cosmos from the stars to the seas and from the wind to the rain. This is what impressed the disciples when Jesus "rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!'" (Mark 4:39). The Creator of all that ever was, is, or will be, is also the Lord of history. The poet tersely sketches the power of the Lord to shape the nations, to raise up and put down, by citing the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the defeat of the Canaanite kings (Num 21:21-24; 21:33f; Deut 2:30-33; 3:1-6). It was the Lord who gave the land of Canaan to Israel and not because of any power or merit of her own.

The poet breaks into praise and once again extols the name of the Lord. "The renown, the fame, of the Lord, increases with every intervention. . . . God's compassion for his people motivates

him to vindicate them by delivering them from their enemies, now and finally at the end of the age.”<sup>6</sup> Commenting on these verses, Calvin wrote, “The whole world is a theater of the display of the divine goodness, wisdom, justice and power, but the Church is the orchestra, as it were – the most conspicuous part of it; and the more intimate and condescending the communication of his benefits, the more attentively are we called to consider them.”<sup>7</sup>

*Alternative to Praise*

*The idols of the nations are silver and gold,  
made by human hands.  
They have mouths, but cannot speak,  
eyes, but cannot see.  
They have ears, but cannot hear,  
nor is there breath in their mouths.  
Those who make them will be like them,  
and so will all who trust in them.*

Psalm 135:15-18

The return journey confronted pilgrims once again with the reality of living in an idol-saturated, anti-Yahweh world. The people of God have always felt the anguish and the antagonism of being in the world but not of the world (John 17:16). The psalmist repeats here what was said in Psalm 115:4-8 about man-made idols being inarticulate, sightless, and inaudible. “Chiseled mouths that can’t talk, painted eyes that can’t see, carved ears that can’t hear – dead wood! Cold metal!” (Ps 135:16-17, The Message). Every idol is the object of a thousand human stares, but without a trace of any recognition. The idol sees nothing, knows nothing. “Their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand.”<sup>8</sup>

We might wish that this description of idolatry has nothing to do with us, but it does. In an age of celebrity, idolized images demand our attention. We are captivated by the daily viewing of media images of famous personalities that cannot recognize us in return. We may not contend with carved and gilded representations of pagan spirits. We are not pressured to bow before a bronze statute, but we are asked to sacrifice our devotion to God and our families on the altar of pagan priorities and passions. We struggle with living in two worlds. We feel the constant pressure to give in to a consumer society’s norms on sexuality, finance, ambition, sports, and truth. The people of God cannot afford to turn a blind eye to subtle forms of soft idolatry and sinful cultural accommodation.

We are enticed through a slow and incremental process that erodes convictions, inculcates habits, and impacts priorities to enter idolatry through the back door. When the immortality symbols of the culture determine our self-worth and significance, then the danger of idolatry is very real. The gods of business do not require that we pay homage at a shrine, but they can require extreme devotion, displacing all other priorities. The gods of fashion do not have holy days, but they

---

<sup>6</sup> Ross, Psalms, 768.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, Psalms, vol. 5:178.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 44:18.

transform the narcissistic “me” into an idol to be adorned and adored. The gods of sport give meaning and escape to my intolerably boring life. Idolatry in our culture is a far greater concern than we often acknowledge. Tim Keller writes, “The biblical concept of idolatry is an extremely sophisticated idea, integrating intellectual, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual categories. There are personal idols, such as romantic love and family, or money, power, and achievement; or access to particular social circles; or the emotional dependence of others on you; or health, fitness, and physical beauty. Many look to these things for hope, meaning, and fulfillment that only God can provide.”<sup>9</sup> If my definition of the good life is my latte ritual, my state-of-art-gourmet kitchen in my starter-castle, my children—successful student-athletes, my oversized SUV, my addiction to Apple products, then chances are I’m struggling with idolatry, and I don’t even know it.<sup>10</sup> I have become like my idols, spiritually deaf and dumb.

*Call to Praise*

*All you Israelites, praise the Lord;  
house of Aaron, praise the Lord;  
house of Levi, praise the Lord;  
you who fear him, praise the Lord.  
Praise be to the Lord from Zion,  
to him who dwells in Jerusalem.  
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 135:19-21

Psalm 135 is a fitting introduction to the Great Hallel Psalms with its eleven-fold variations of “Hallelujah!” The psalm opens and closes with a five-fold drum beat of praise, followed by the finale, “Praise the Lord.” All of Israel is summed to praise. This psalm serves as a welcome resource for the journey down the mountain and back into the daily routine. Pray this psalm as you return to university or to a corporate office or as you hit the road as a sales rep. Let this psalm remind you to praise the Lord; let it encourage you that the Lord is sovereign; let it warn you of the dangers of idolatry. This well-crafted mosaic of Scriptures forms a beautiful picture of praise. The reference to the house of the Lord at the beginning is matched with the house of Aaron and the house of Levi at the end. By using the metaphor of “house” the psalmist stresses that the people of God are a family of families coming before God to sing out their “Hallelujahs!”

The author of the Book of Hebrews developed the metaphor of the “house” in a manner similar to the psalmist, to underscore the unity and family identity of the people of God. He wrote, “We are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory” (Heb 3:6). The author celebrates the identity and dignity of the people of God by calling them “holy brothers and sisters,” and by affirming that they all “share in the heavenly calling” (Heb 3:1). He challenges them to fix their thoughts on Jesus who “was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house” (Heb 3:2).

---

<sup>9</sup> Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, xix.

<sup>10</sup> Goetz, *Death by Suburb*, 9.

But then, the author brings the meaning of the “home” metaphor home so to speak. He writes, “Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. ‘Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house’ (Num 12:7), bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the Son over God’s house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory” (Heb 3:3). Moses was sent by God to deliver his people out of bondage. He “was faithful in all God’s house,” humbly and faithfully seeking to lead the people of God according to the will of God (Heb 3:5). But as great as Moses was, Jesus is far greater. Moses was a servant in God’s house, but Jesus is the Son. Jesus is not just faithful *in* God’s house; he is faithful *over* God’s house. There is no more fitting conclusion to this meta-narrative of redemption than Hallelujah!