

Psalm 134
 “Bless the LORD Who Blesses Us”
 Pastor Jason Van Bommel

A Song of Ascents.

¹*Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD,
 who stand by night in the house of the LORD!*

²*Lift up your hands to the holy place
 and bless the LORD!*

³*May the LORD bless you from Zion,
 he who made heaven and earth!*

Introduction: A Fitting Close to the Songs of Ascents

I love perfect endings, and I get really frustrated when movies or books don't end the way I think they should. Many times the ending of something will tell you much about the skill of the writers and the quality of the work as a whole. So many people watched the TV series *Lost* and were shocked and disappointed by the ending, which seemed to leave so many unanswered questions and probably revealed that the writers didn't know what they were doing as they kept introducing twist after twist into the series. On the other hand, I just finished teaching *Pilgrim's Progress* this past week, and the ending of that classic work is brilliant, bringing a joyful, satisfying conclusion and a clear warning at the same time.

I was talking with someone on Friday about today's sermon, and when I quoted Psalm 134, they said, "That seems like just the right ending to this series of psalms." And it does, doesn't it? The Songs of Ascents are pilgrim songs, songs for the journey to the Temple, sung by God's people as they ascended the mountains and then the Temple Mound and then the steps of the Temple. Here, in Psalm 134, we have a joyful song of praise that is a call-and-response between the people and the priests in the Temple.

Some commentators imagine this psalm being on the lips of the worshiping pilgrims as they arrive in Jerusalem in the evening, stopping by the Temple for the evening sacrifice on their long-awaited arrival. They cry out to the priests and Levites serving in the Temple, lighting the lamps and offering the evening sacrifice:

*Hey! Bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD,
 who stand by night in the house of the LORD!*

*Lift up your hands to the holy place
 and bless the LORD!*

By the way, the first word of this psalm means "Look!" or "Behold!" or "Pay attention!" and is the same word as the first word of Psalm 133, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is . . ."

Then, the priests and Levites in the Temple turn to respond in blessing to the worshiping pilgrims,

*“May the LORD bless you from Zion,
he who made heaven and earth!”*

Other commentators imagine this psalm as the parting psalm, at the end of the week-long festival, and thus this is the parting exchange between the pilgrims and the priests and the blessing is the send-off blessing, as the pilgrims return to their ordinary lives in the hostile world, far from the loving, blessed, good and pleasant assembly of God’s people for worship.

We don’t know for sure when it was sung, so perhaps both commentators are correct and it was sung both at arrival and at departure. We do know the Hallel psalms (Psalm 113-118) were sung daily during some of the feasts, so perhaps the Songs of Ascents were also sung more than once during the festival journey. Whenever it was sung, the psalm surely is an exchange between people and priests. It is a fitting culmination of the worshipful longing of these psalms.

I. What Does It Mean to Bless the LORD?

For me, this psalm is one that prompts a question you may or may not have ever pondered: What does it mean for us to bless the Lord? The psalms use this language over and over again, and we’ve sung it several times this morning – “Bless the LORD, O my soul!” Here, Psalm 134 opens with a call to bless the LORD and then closes with a pronouncement of blessing, “May the LORD bless you.”

I think we know what it means to be blessed by the LORD, but how in the world do we bless the LORD? The Hebrew word used here is the same throughout, all three times – Barak. But obviously, the way we bless the LORD is fundamentally different from the way God blesses us.

To bless someone is to speak well of them or speak a good word toward them. When we bless the LORD, we speak well of Him. We proclaim aloud what is true of God – who He is and what He has done. In other words, we praise Him, and our words are a meager attempt to capture the goodness, wisdom, sovereignty, holiness, and faithfulness of God. Our words are a response to what God has revealed about Himself and what He has done for us.

Perhaps the psalm that best captures this is Psalm 103 –

*Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!*

² *Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,*

³ *who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,*

⁴ *who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,*

⁵ *who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

⁶ *The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.*

- ⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
- ⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- ⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
- ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
- ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
- ¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
- ¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
- ¹⁴ For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.

That's what it means to bless the LORD!

But when God blesses us, it is something different entirely. At the heart is the same basic idea of speaking well of someone. But God's words are not like our words. God's word is creative, bringing into being that which is not. So, God speaks well of us and His words of blessing bring about for us the good He speaks. He calls us His and by so calling us, we are made His. He calls us loved, and by the speaking of His word, we are loved. He calls us forgiven and holy, and by the power of His sovereign, almighty word, we are forgiven and we are made holy!

By the way, at the heart of the problem with the name-it-and-claim-it prosperity Gospel is a confusion of this fundamental distinction between the Creator and us, His creatures. They treat our words as if they have creative power, as if the words we speak shape reality the way God's words do. They even excuse this confusion by saying that we are made in God's image and called to exercise dominion, and so our words have great power to bless and curse, to bring into being and to shape our futures. This is a concept imported from the New Age movement, as reflected in books like *The Secret* and taught by Oprah Winfrey, and it has no part of Biblical Christianity.

We speak blessing in response to God's word of blessing. We respond to God and His powerful word with our worship.

2. Who Should Bless the LORD?

Psalm 134 raises another question: Who should bless the LORD? In this psalm, the pilgrims are calling on the priests and Levites in the Temple to bless the LORD. These words are spoken to the professional worshipers, whose life calling is to minister in the Temple:

¹Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD,
who stand by night in the house of the LORD!

²Lift up your hands to the holy place
and bless the LORD!

Is this the way we should think of worship, something done by a select chosen few who can dedicate their lives to such a calling? No. In the new covenant age, all believers are priests, who serve the LORD in the new and living Temple of the church:

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. – 1 Peter 2:9-10, ESV

And while the priests in the Old Covenant lifted up their hands toward the holy place, we are now made holy, so that the very hands we lift in prayer and praise are themselves holy hands, as Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:8 – “*I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling.*”

What offering do we bring as the royal priesthood, God’s holy and chosen people?

Hebrews 13 tells us that our praises and our blessing the LORD is the sacrifice we bring –

Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. – Hebrews 13:15-16, ESV

But I’m getting ahead of myself. We’ll come back to the question of how we bless the LORD later.

3. Why Should We Bless the LORD?

First, I’d like to deal with the question of why: Why should we bless the LORD?

I’d like to answer this by looking back over the Songs of Ascents to make note of what we’ve learned on the pilgrim journey:

In Psalm 120, we began with distress over a world of violence and hatred, and so we bless the LORD because He is the only source of peace in a world set on war and division.

In Psalm 121, we sang “I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?” So, we bless the LORD, for He is our help and our keeper, our only security in all of life.

In Psalm 122, we sang “I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”

Our feet have been standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem!”

So, we bless the LORD as the One who gathers His people and blesses His gathered, worshiping people with His security and peace.

In Psalm 123, we began the second trio of psalms as we sang in longing, “our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he has mercy upon us.” So, we bless the LORD as the One who answers the longing of our hearts for mercy. He has mercy on us.

From Psalm 124, we bless the LORD as the One who has indeed been on our side and who has delivered us from the snares and traps of our enemies.

From Psalm 125, we bless the LORD as the One who surrounds His people with His protection and blesses His people with His peace.

From Psalm 126, we bless the LORD as the One who restores our fortunes like streams in the desert, the One who blesses us when we sow in tears that we might reap with shouts of joy!

From Psalm 127, we bless the LORD who is the builder of our house and the keeper of our city, the One who ensures that our labors are not in vain in Him. He gives His beloved sleep, the rest of peace He alone can give.

From Psalm 128, we bless the LORD as the One who blesses and keeps our families and our homes, making our families prosper spiritually for His glory.

From Psalm 129, we bless the LORD as the One who protects us in the midst of painful persecution, the One who defeats our enemies and brings their plans to harm us to nothing.

From Psalm 130, we bless the LORD for His plenteous and perfect redemption, for He has redeemed us from all our iniquities through Christ.

From Psalm 131, we bless the LORD who satisfies our souls with Himself and who quiets us with contentment in Him.

From Psalm 132, we bless the LORD for giving us such a wonderful, eternal king, who wears the shining crown promised to David’s offspring forever. Under His kingship, he makes us into priests and clothes us with righteousness and salvation – with Jesus Himself – that we may shout for joy.

From Psalm 133, we bless the LORD who created unity among His people, the good and pleasant blessing accomplished by Christ and sealed to us by the Holy Spirit, making us one in Him.

So, we have reason after reason to bless the LORD – our peace, our security, our help, our deliverance, our protection, our satisfaction, our contentment, our redemption, the true and lasting meaning of our lives, our identity and ingathering as the redeemed people of God, our unity and the rich mercy we receive every day. We have abundant reasons to bless the LORD, so is our blessing Him as abundant as the reasons we have for it?

4. How Should We Bless the LORD?

So, now that we’ve reviewed some of the reasons we have for blessing the LORD, how should we bless the LORD. Well, two of the expressions used in the Songs of Ascents may make us Presbyterians uncomfortable, but we need to hear them:

- I. Psalm 132 says we shout for joy.

2. Psalm 134 says we lift up our hands toward the holy place, which according to 1 Timothy 2, we can understand to say that we lift up holy hands, since we are now not only priests but also the living stones of God's holy Temple.

Now, these two expressions may not mean exactly what we think they mean at first glance: To shout for joy is to praise God with joyful gratitude for all He has done for us. To lift up holy hands is to pray, to seek the blessing of the LORD. Thus "shout for joy" recognizes all that God has done for us and how blessed we truly are, while "lift up hands" recognizes our continual dependence on the LORD for ongoing mercy every day.

The emotional weight and the physical posture are important. Are we really thankful and joyful if we mumble and mutter our way through praise songs and hymns? Are we really needy and dependent on God if we're half-asleep in our prayers or dull and routine in our petitions?

The emphasis throughout the Songs of Ascents is on the gathering of God's people for worship. And so the primary way we should seek to apply this psalm and bless the LORD is in our approach to gathered worship on the Lord's Day. As we gather each Sunday morning to bless the Lord, we should come eagerly, expectantly, thankfully, joyfully and worship in a unified way as God's redeemed people, singing with joyful gratitude and seeking His mercy and peace.

As we saw in 1 Peter 2 and Hebrews 13, we come as a holy priesthood to offer a sacrifice of praise, our thanksgiving offering. So we should ask, "What is the quality of the sacrifice of praise I am bringing? Does it really bring honor to God and reflect His goodness and my gratitude?"

And yet, we don't only bless the LORD in our gathered worship on Sunday morning. Our offering is not just praise from our lips, but we are called to offer our whole lives, as living sacrifices –

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

– Romans 12:1-2, ESV

So each moment of each day, we should be living lives of worship, in response to God's mercy.

5. What Does It Mean for the LORD to Bless Us?

Our final question in our outline exploration of this brief psalm is "What does it mean for the LORD to bless us?" We've already seen how different the LORD's blessing of us is from our blessing of Him. We say and sing and pray what is true about God in response to what He has revealed to us and done for us. But God blesses us when He speaks His powerful, creative word over us and brings into being that which He speaks. Another way this has been expressed is that we love God because He is lovely, but God does not love us because we are lovely, but rather He makes us lovely because He loves us.

Now, as we close, I'd like to look more closely at this final line and what it's saying –

*May the LORD bless you from Zion,
he who made heaven and earth!*

The LORD, YaHWeH, is consistently the name for God used throughout the Songs of Ascents. It tells us He is the Great I AM, the self-sufficient, never-changing One. Our covenant Lord never fails, for He is all-sufficient in Himself and He never changes.

Bless you from Zion – Zion refers both to God’s heavenly throne and to His earthly kingdom-city, the church. God blesses His people from His heavenly throne and through His earthly kingdom, the church.

He who made heaven and earth – This is now the third time God has been identified in this way in the Songs of Ascents –

My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth. – Psalm 121:2

Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth. – Psalm 124:8

This phrase is a reminder to us of the limitless power and resources of the LORD. He is the maker of heaven and earth. Surely, He can help us!

This reminds me of the end of Isaiah 40, where a similar expression is used in a beautiful way–

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.
³⁰ Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
³¹ but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint. – Isaiah 40:28-31, ESV*

As we gather in each Sunday morning for worship, and as we go out again to our daily lives, let’s remember that we are called to bless the One who is so worthy of our praise, and we are blessed by Him who never changes, who dwells in the midst of His people, who made heaven and earth, and whose strength and wisdom know no end.