

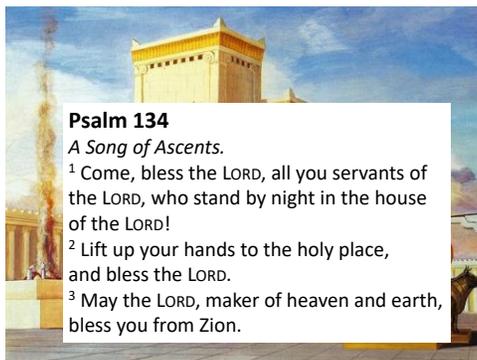
Sacred practice of blessing farewell

Psalm 134

By pastor Ken Keyte

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1



Psalm 134

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, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.

It's been a journey through *15 psalms* and *15 sermons* that we first began just over a year ago, *starting off* with Psalm 120. We've taken a *couple of detours* along the way to explore other parts of scripture, but now *finally* we've reached our *destination* at the *last psalm of ascent* (psalm 134).

It's *just a little psalm* and we might even *wonder* whether the journey was *worth it*, since *three verses* is *all we get* from this psalm at the *end!*

Yet although it's *short*, this little psalm contains the *greatest thing* we can ever expect to *give or get* from God.

What might that be?

Turn to your neighbour and discuss this question with them.

2

If a church service consisted of doing just one thing only, what would you want that one thing to be?

- Celebrating what God has done for you?
- Hearing notices about what's happening in our church?
- Worshipping God with worship songs?
- Bringing your offering to God?
- Praying for our missionaries and the world?
- Listening to God's word being preached?
- Being blessed before you go home at the end of the service?

If a church service consisted of doing just one thing only, what would you want that one thing to be?

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3



For the *pilgrims* travelling the dusty road *up to Jerusalem* singing the *15 psalms of ascent* on their way to the *annual worship festivals* of: *Passover, Pentecost* and *Tabernacles*,

psalm 134 represents the *blessing* they'd come all the way to the temple *to give God*, and the *blessing* they hoped to receive *from God*, before returning home.

So this psalm represents the *single most important thing* the pilgrims wanted to do at the temple, *To bless God and be blessed by God!*

You see, although it's short, *this little psalm* communicates the *greatest thing* we can ever *give and get* from God - *a blessing!*

At the *end* of their week-long *worship festivities*, after going to the temple *every day* to:

- *celebrate what God had done*,
- *to offer their sacrifice*,
- *to worship the Lord*,
- *to pray*,
- *and to hear the holy scriptures preached*.

On the *night* before their long journey back home, the *words of Psalm 134* were said at the *end* of their *final worship service* at the temple.

Psalm 134 communicates the *sacred practice of blessing farewell*.

3a

There's *two parts* to it.

A part about *the pilgrims blessing God* and a part about *God blessing the pilgrims*.

Bless the Lord

2



Bible commentators think that the *first two lines* of this psalm would've been spoken in unison *by the pilgrims to the Levitical priests*.

It's a little *hard for us* to understand *why* the pilgrim worshipers needed to *invite the levitical priests to come and bless the Lord* by *standing in the sanctuary with hands raised in worship and prayer through the night*, after they'd gone back to their homes.

We're so used to *jumping in the car* to go to church to *worship the Lord any given Sunday* we want to, that we take this privilege *for granted*.

But *back then*, there was only *one temple* in *all* of Israel, located in *Jerusalem*, the *Holy city on Mount Zion*, where *the ark of the covenant* resided in the holy place.

However *most of Israel's population* lived in *small rural farming villages* scattered across the *provinces of Israel*.

And since the *only means of transport* were *by foot or by donkey*, for many of them, getting to the temple was a *journey of several days* there and *back again!*

No wonder God's laws *only* required their attendance at the major worship festivals just *three times a year!*

But that *didn't mean* God was *only worshipped* at the temple *three times a year*. The Lord was worshipped at the temple *continually throughout the year*. Which is why the *Levitical priests* lived in Jerusalem, *servicing at the temple*, ensuring that the Lord was worshipped *not only at festival time*, but *throughout the year*, whether the people were *present or not!*

That's why in psalm 134, the pilgrims, who would be *returning home* the next morning after the *close of the festival*, call upon the priests to *carry on blessing the Lord* throughout the night.

Whenever a *priest*, or a *vicar*, or a *pastor*, or (*any believer* for that matter), *pronounces a blessing* on someone, they are *declaring God's favour* over them.

It's a much more *confident form of prayer* than when we ask God to *grant a favourable outcome* for us, like *protection from harm*, or *provision of something* we need.

A blessing is a *declaration of what God has already promised he will do*. One definition of a blessing is to '*speak well of someone*.'

On Wednesday night *David and Wenke Holmes* had *Raewyn and I* round for dinner at their place, and we had a lovely meal with them and enjoyed talking about some of their missionary experiences and aspirations. Our conversation was quite encouraging for us as we begin exploring the possibility of *overseas mission work* if that's what God has for us to do *next*.

When it was time for us to go home, *Wenke* said a *beautiful blessing over us*. It wasn't so much a prayer for us, but rather a *statement of God's guiding, protecting, empowering presence* with us as we *go about the journey* He has *set before us*.

Raewyn and I really appreciated it because the journey for us is *very uncertain at present* and it's *not easy* trying to be *at peace about what lies ahead*.

Wenke was blessing us by *speaking well over us* as she *affirmed what God has promised he will do not only for us but for all his pilgrims who seek to embark on the journey he's set before us*.

But in the *first line* of Psalm 134, it's *the other way round!* Rather than the *priests* declaring *God's favour over the pilgrims* for the journey ahead of them, it's the *pilgrims* who are *calling on the priests to continue blessing God* into the night, after they've *returned home!*

You see, back then it was *the priests who remained at the temple* ensuring God was being *blessed continually* even after the pilgrims had *returned back home* from the worship festivals.

The New Testament *letter of Hebrews* explains that *prior to Jesus*, priests worshiped in a temple that is a *sketchy shadow* of the *heavenly one* (8:5). There had to be many *priests* because their *mortality* prevented them from *continuing in the priesthood* after death! However, *all this changed* when Jesus came as *our high priest!* He entered the Holy Place *once and for all* (9:12) enabling us to enter God's presence by a *new and living way* that Jesus has opened for us (10:19) by *sacrificing his life for all our sins*. There Jesus now *continues his priestly duties on our behalf* forever and ever! (7:23).

Whether we realise it or not, *every Sunday* as we *gather for worship* at church, we do *something similar* to what the pilgrims at the temple did on the last evening worship service, just before *returning home* from the festival. With the words of psalm 134 they invited *all the priests* to, "*Come and bless the LORD, all you servants of the Lord who stand by night in the house of the LORD, Lift up your hands in the holy place and bless the LORD!*"

As *we worship Jesus* our Lord and Saviour, we *call on him to do the same!* To *continue blessing the LORD in the holy place*, as we *return* to our *homes, our schools, our work places,* and our *neighbourhoods*.

If we were restricted to doing *only one thing* at church (which thankfully we *aren't!*) then *this* would surely be *one thing* we'd want to make sure we *do!*

We want to *bless the Lord* by *speaking well of the Lord* for what he has *done for us* and *continues to do on our behalf in the Holy Place!*

That's *worth coming to church for* don't you think?

The Lord bless you

5



I said before that the *first line of Psalm 134*, is the *other way round* from what we *usually think happens in a blessing*. Rather than the *priests blessing the pilgrims* for their journey home, the *pilgrims are calling on the priests to continue blessing God*, after they've returned home.

But the *sacred practice of blessing* isn't a *one way street!*
It's a *two way street!*

In fact it's probably more like the *multilane I5 interstate freeway* we drove along, on our trip *to and from Yosemite National park*. Because the *sacred practice of blessing* runs continually *both ways* from *us to God* and from *God to us!*

After the pilgrims had *invited the priests to continue blessing the Lord* after they'd *gone back home*, the *priest* responds in verse 3 of psalm 134 with a *blessing from God* for the *pilgrims returning home*.

"May the LORD, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion"

Like *many pastors*, I like *closing the service with a blessing* (or a benediction as its properly known). There's lots of them in the Bible. The *Apostle Paul* always *finished his letters off with a benediction*. Here's a few of my favourites:

- Romans 15:13: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*
- 2Corinthians 13:14: *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*
- 2 Thessalonians 3:16: *Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.*
- Jude 1:24: *To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—²⁵ to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*

Something *very special* is communicated by blessings such as these. They *declare God's favour* over those whom the blessing is for, *speaking well of them*, affirming what God has *promised he will do*.

Pronouncing a blessing before departing *out into the world again*, like the pilgrims were about to do, and *like we do* at the conclusion of a church service is a *very important thing* for a *pastor or priest*, or *anyone* to do.

Life is *full of transitions* from the *familiar* to the *unknown*. Whether that be:

- *travelling from the temple* to their *farms back home*,
- going from *church back into the world we live and work in*,
- *relocating* to a *new place to live* (like Ryan and Kasandra Vincent are about to do),
- starting at a *new school* (like our *daughter Ashley* has just done), *commencing a new job* (like *Sjaan Rounds* is doing),
- *starting a family* (like Ryan Smyth and Pre have done),

- *losing your job*
- *losing a loved one (like Alf Buckton and Ross and Ruth Jenkins have recently),*
- *or retirement (which some of you may soon be going through).*

Receiving a blessing from God provides us with assurance that God is with us and for us especially in transition times such as these!

What's extra special about the benediction of Psalm 134 is that it affirmed to the pilgrims who were about to depart from Jerusalem to return to their homes, that the maker of heaven and earth blesses you from Zion!

Now they could return home, knowing they were blessed to be in the world that God has made!

That's worth coming to church for don't you think?

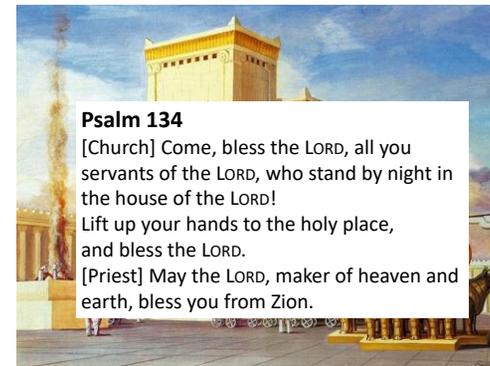
Psalm 134 represents the single most important thing for the pilgrims to give and receive upon reaching their destination at the temple in Jerusalem.

To bless God and to be blessed by God!

You see, although it's short, this little psalm communicates the greatest thing we can ever give or get from God - the sacred practice of blessing farewell!

And that concludes the sermon series on the psalms of Ascent!

So let's have a go at saying psalm 134 (the very last psalm of Ascent], like it may well have been said long ago on the last night of worship before the pilgrims returned home?



Psalm 134

[Church] Come, 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.

[Priest] May the LORD, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.

[Church] 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.

[Priest] ³ May the LORD, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.