

**Ascend:
When Worship Comes Full Circle
Psalm 134**

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Introduction to Text: This morning we are concluding a series called, "Ascend." This series has been an expositional study of Psalms 120-134. Each of these Psalms has the heading "Song of Ascents." Most believe that these are songs that worshippers sang as they made their way to Jerusalem for thrice annual special times of worship. If this is so, then we learn a great deal about what was on their hearts as they approached worship and thus understand what should be upon our hearts as we prepare to worship or just give attention to the subject of worship. We are considering one each Sunday for the weeks of this summer. Today, we are studying Psalm 134.

Text: Now praise the LORD,
all you servants of the LORD
who stand in the LORD's house at night!
² Lift up your hands in the holy place
and praise the LORD!
³ May the LORD,
Maker of heaven and earth,
bless you from Zion.

Introduction: I hear this kind of statement regularly. I heard it this week after one of our FAITH visits. "We went to see if we could be a blessing to this person, but we were the ones who were blessed." I have heard that sentiment countless times over these last weeks as individuals have been involved in flood relief. There is a sense that when we attempt to do something with the right heart and attitude that blesses others, we get blessed as well. How much more true this sentiment when the object of our blessing is God Himself. This revelation is at the heart of Psalm 134.

The opening words of Psalm 134, "Praise the LORD," are the closing theme of the book. If you scan Psalm 135-150, you will recognize song after song in just simple praise to the Lord. In fact, that is the sole subject of the next Psalm, Psalm 135.

Think about the full circle of these Psalms. Back in Psalm 120, this section starts off in distress and discouragement. The first line is "In my distress I called to the Lord." In 121, the Psalmist looks up from his discouragement to see the Lord. We have seen the worshippers seek the blessing of God for their nation (126) and for their families (127 and 128). We have seen from the worshippers this constant progression from discontentment and discouragement to praise and blessing.

Now, we are at the end. Some see this as something of the benediction before they return to their homes. In this Psalm, we see worship that comes full circle.

The Invitation to Worship

Eugene Peterson wrote:

This sentence, “Come praise (or bless) the Lord,” is an invitation; it is also a command. Having arrived at the place of worship, will we now sit around and tell stories about the trip? Having gotten to the big city, will we spend our time here as tourists, visiting the bazaars, window shopping and trading? Having gotten Jerusalem checked off our list of things to do, will we immediately begin looking for another challenge, another holy place to visit? Will the temple be a place to socialize, receive congratulations from others on our achievement, a place to share gossip and trade stories, a place to make business contacts that will improve our prospects back home? But that is not why you made the trip....You are here because God blessed you. Now you bless God.¹

Let’s look at several key phrases in verse 1.

- Central Purpose of Worship

“Now, praise the Lord.” This points us to the purpose of worship. When all is said and done, we are here to praise the Lord. We are here to bless the Lord. There are other things that will happen and should happen, but the central purpose is to bless the Lord.

Here is the purpose described in the hymn Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.

Come Thou Fount of every blessing
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise

I think of the simple chorus by Andre Crouch:

Bless the Lord, Oh my soul
And all that is within me
Bless His holy name

He has done great things
He has done great things
He has done great things
Bless His holy name

W.T. Conner taught theology for almost 50 years at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He called worship “the first business of the church” (The Gospel of Redemption, 277).

Here is our central purpose.

- New Testament Priests of Worship

Now, consider the second phrase of verse 1: “all you servants of the Lord who stand in the Lord’s House.”

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 193.

We think priests. We might think pastors or worship leaders. But in the New Testament sense, this idea gets exploded.

Listen to 2 Peter 2:9-10.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, a people for His possession,

Ok, that is all of us? What are we to do as this royal priesthood?

so that you may proclaim the praises
of the One who called you out of darkness
into His marvelous light.

¹⁰ Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

- Perpetual Worship

In the last phrase of verse 1, we get the words "at night." There is both a literal and figurative way to take this phrase. Literally, we are to worship through the night. In comparison to the daytime worship, we are to worship continually. Figuratively, and we have seen this throughout the Songs of Ascents, we are to worship even in the dark days of this life.

So, our worship is to be unceasing. Why? He has done great things.

The Intercession of Worship

But, I also want you to notice the "intercession of worship." Where is the intercession of worship in this passage? It is in verse 2, "lifting up your hands in the holy place." Now, the lifting of hands just for worship has become more commonplace in the church today, including our church. In the right spirit, there is certainly nothing wrong with that. However, I would want you to see the symbolism of such a tangible action of worship. In the Bible, there seems to be a connection between lifting hands and praying.

When the Temple was dedicated, Solomon, as he led the congregation in that prayer of dedication "spread out his hands toward heaven." (1 Kings 8:22)

The same truth is communicated in Psalm 28:2. "Listen to the sound of my pleading when I cry to You for help, when I lift up my hands toward Your holy sanctuary."

In the instruction of prayer given by to Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:8, Paul wrote: "Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands."

- Prayer is the acknowledgement of His Power and our dependence.

And the lifting of hands can be a tangible symbol to communicate that dependence.

The Irony of Worship

Finally, in verse 3, we come to the irony of worship. The Psalm starts out with the invitation to bless God, but in verse 3, the indication is that the people get blessed. Again, it is what I call the circle of blessing or worship.

If you start looking to be blessed you will leave empty; if you look to bless the Lord, you end up being blessed.

One commentator remarked that just as commitment is a two-way relationship so is blessing, and blessing is a lop-sided duality."²

Think of it this way. When we bless God, we are acknowledging Who He is and what He has done. When God blesses us, He is making of us what we are not and giving us what we cannot give ourselves.³

What is the impact of receiving this blessing? May it be that the power which has been acknowledged in worship comes flooding into our lives!" That's the so what of our message today. May we live in and by and through the power of God that we have come to worship today! That is not necessarily the purpose of our worship, but it is the blessing of our worship.

²Leslie Allen, *Word Biblical Commentary*.

³ Derek Kidner, *InterVarsity Press Commentary* as quoted in Beth Moore's *Stepping Up*, p. 116.