

## Psalm 134 A Song of Arrival

The comforts of modern travel may strip us of the stinging realities that would have been evident in a caravan of God-fearing Jews traveling up to Jerusalem. From Hebron in the south, or over from the coastal city of Joppa, or, to rewind to the first psalm of ascent, down from Meshech between the Black and Caspian Seas, no journey to the holy city was free from discomforts or dangers.<sup>1</sup> Exposure to the elements, or to robbers who knew well the free-flow of peoples who were coming and going from the great city of David, probably weighed on the minds of the travelers.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, to keep the various feasts of the LORD that would take place in Jerusalem, they would willingly and sacrificially make the trip, often from great distances.

While making these yearly, important excursions, to help with whatever might be their points of struggle, they took to tried and true songs, much like we do in our troubles and challenges. If only to help them prepare for their arrival in the holy city and the holy place of the temple, they sang them year after year. Like many of you today, they anticipated the presence of God and His gathered people, and in that anticipation, they prepared for those moments of blessing through the hearing, singing, and seeing the Word through the various elements. Sapped of physical strength, but filled up with hope in the LORD, many of the pilgrims have traveled from the exilic, faraway lands of Psalm 120 to now finding themselves in the LORD's temple. They could now exhale with celebration.<sup>3</sup> By the grace of Yahweh, they have left the winds of the paganism are now breathing the very air of God's glory and presence.

It's obvious that this text suits well the close of a worship service.<sup>4</sup> But, as was typical of many worship contexts then, and many since, there is exhortation before the closing. And, like many corporate worship contexts since, it ends with a benediction.

### I. The Exhortations

#### A. *Bless the LORD*

The servants in view here aren't the everyday, faithful Jews who are seeking to serve and love the Lord with all heart, soul, mind, and strength. Here, it appears, that the priests of the temple are being implored in the song to enter into this act of blessing the LORD.<sup>5</sup> We understand this by the key context clues in the first verse. The noun *servant* is frequently used for the priests and their Levite helpers, and the participle *who stand* signifies those who wait upon, or minister.<sup>6</sup>

Now, what did the priests do? That seems like a reasonable question. Were they being implored by the pilgrims to do what they were already responsible to do? That's unlikely the intent of

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<sup>1</sup> Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 367. (And, in reality, what journey is free from those things?!)

<sup>2</sup> This is an undercurrent detail in the Good Samaritan account of Luke 10.

<sup>3</sup> James Hamilton, *EBTC: Psalms*, 427.

<sup>4</sup> ESV Study Bible

<sup>5</sup> Longman & Garland, *Psalms*, 938.

<sup>6</sup> OT scholar Alan Ross directs our attention to Ezekiel 44:15, Zechariah 3:7, Judges 20:28, and 2 Chronicles 29:11 as support for this.

the exhortation. But calling upon the priests to fulfill their calling with excellence is reasonable. The pilgrims are addressing those in the temple who *stand by night*, a unique, priestly responsibility.

We recently considered the priesthood in our Sunday morning study. Jim noted there that the station of the priest was not a stagnant post, simply existing for religious optics. That brother had work to do. He was bloodied by the sacrifices, multiple times a day, both for his own sins and for the sins of the people. It was laid on him to intercede for the people, to cry out to God on their behalf. The priest taught the people God's word. And, he was involved in the liturgy, which included the relaying of God's blessings via benedictions, not unlike what we find in verse 3. These tasks glorified God. Yet, to *bless the LORD* has more of a verbal tint to it. It's an utterance of some kind. In 1 Chronicles 23, as the ark was returned to its rightful place in the temple, we get a better sense of what *blessing the LORD* looked like, "*And [the priests] were to stand every morning, thanking and praising the LORD, and likewise at evening.*"

You might remember that God chose the sons of Aaron to stand before Him and serve at the altar of the tabernacle. It was a privileged position. But throughout the early days and into the life and times of David, the priesthood continued to falter at the unfaithfulness of those that filled the office. You may recall Eli's sons as a point of evidence, with the climax of the infidelity of the priesthood taking place as God withdrew His glory from the temple altogether in Ezekiel 10. Four hundred years earlier the glory left the temple via the ark of the covenant during the days of Samuel. More than chinks, there were large gashes in the armor of the priesthood. A new and better one was desperately needed.

This night crew of priests being addressed by the pilgrims to *bless the LORD* were being exhorted to fulfill their duties—especially to express with the fruit of the lips His goodness and glory.

## ***B. All you servants***

### *1. Stand by night in His house*

There aren't many places in the world where the night hours are as equally teeming with activity as the daytime. With the rise of industry and technology, the last 50 years there has been an incredible increase in what are now dubbed as "24-hour cities."<sup>7</sup> New York City has held that distinction for a few decades, but with many peoples worldwide pooling into urban contexts, there are many cities that seem to never sleep. To our text, who would envision even the largest cities in the years between 400 BC to 900 BC having a ceaseless rhythm of activity? It sounds like a stretch. Yet, for these priests and their appointed helpers from the clan of Levi, they were to attend to their allotted duties, blessing God around the clock.<sup>8</sup>

But can we assume that, in the quiet of the night, the priests and Levites were clocking in and out without stumbling in any way? Was there not the temptation to catch some sleep eye? Or,

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<sup>7</sup> Hugh Kelly, *24-Hour Cities*, 2016. This is a book on investment/real estate, but it takes an interesting deep dive on the historical development of the city over the past century.

<sup>8</sup> This certainly would have included the calendar festivals in Jewish life, with some of them possessing evening elements in the temple/synagogue such as Passover.

as boys will be boys, playing a game to pass the time? Or, overloading the conversations with the latest, local sporting triumphs? Again, there was no super-power of spotless faithfulness for those serving in the priesthood.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, they were to **stand** by night in the house of the LORD, signifying a readiness, an eagerness, and a posture that come what may, to serve worthily was the exhortation. But there was a greater danger than falling to sleep on the job or catching up on the local sports scene. These priests were to stand ready and distinguish their service in another way.

## 2. *Lift up your hands to the holy place*

The exhortation to **lift up** one's **hands** was not the primary detail prescribed, or the exact acceptable bodily position of true worship to the LORD. This reference to lifting up hands was a sister act to praying. It was a norm in Jewish worship that reflected the posture of the heart.<sup>10</sup> Hands lifted up, heart lifted up. Hands open to receive, heart open to receive. And the danger, as the priests are exhorted to beware of through the sojourner's songs here, is that they would play the part in ritual only. They might be fulfilling their duties of service, intercession, and praise outwardly, but the inward, heart-reality was what Jesus warned the religious leaders against in his own day, "*The people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me.*" Let's be careful, then, to lift our hands without a genuflecting heart. But let's also be careful to assume ostentation on the part of our brother or sister whose hands are hard to keep down when considering God's glory.

Now, let's turn this arrow of priesthood even more towards us. Are these exhortations in any way for me and my 9-5 job? As an honorable, hard-working homemaker? As a pastor, or an IT tech? In Christ, the answer is a resounding yes. He has not wavered in the reality of His grace through the ages, but by His gospel—we are tied to this very scene happening in Psalm 134. And here's the tie, Revelation 1:5b–6, "...*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood [6] and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*" We are all in the royal priesthood, serving alongside and under Christ, our High Priest.<sup>11</sup> And being so, we are like those priests in this way: We have sanctioned access to the inner sanctuary of God's heart, through the blood of Jesus! We have no need for this type of ritualistic priesthood, or for an earthly priest who is prone to the weaknesses of sin. No, we have One who sympathizes with our weaknesses, yet without sin. We'll be considering in Hebrews this Great Priest, His priestly works, and the kind of glorious access that each of us enjoys communing with God through this lone Mediator between God and man, our Lord Jesus.

And how else are we like these priests? We mediate Christ's royal authority and His work on the cross to a sinful world, through our life and our witness!<sup>12</sup> It's a tall task, but it's ours, and

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<sup>9</sup> It's worth noting that those who serve Christ in more of a full-time capacity are just as susceptible to various temptations. We're grateful for your consistent prayers and encouragements to press on! We need them!

<sup>10</sup> Leviticus 9:22, "*Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them...*"

<sup>11</sup> 1 Peter 2:9, "*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.*"

<sup>12</sup> G.K. Beale, *NIGTC: Revelation*, 192.

we must live up to it, dependent on God's help to stand by night, ready; to lift up holy hands, genuine, prayerful, with His praise triggered in our mouths.

But this exhortation is met with a reply. The freshly arrived travelers have encouraged the priests in song, but verse 3 seems to be a word from the other direction. It was an anticipation of the reply of those priests. It was the place of the priest to pronounce blessing, and this pronouncement upon the weary travelers is what they longed for. It was a fitting apple of gold set in silver.<sup>13</sup>

## II. A Benediction

### A. *May the LORD bless you from Zion*

The yearning of these new arrivals was to experience the fullness of God's blessing. Finding faithful priests fulfilling their callings with heartfelt faithfulness and hearing a benediction of blessing from their lips after an extended time away from God's dwelling place of Zion—things couldn't be better. This benediction is a kind prayer where God is called upon to work on their behalf to bless. But that word bless is a sticky wicket, isn't it? When we reverse course to six psalms back to Psalm 128, Matt was spot on. The abuse and overuse of the term *bless* in our own day skews the way people think of the blessing of God. But, as Matt described, to be blessed is to abide in a kind of happiness which arises from and is dependent upon knowing God's favor.<sup>14</sup> Even in circumstances which seem most unfavorable, the blessing of God can rest upon His child.<sup>15</sup> And it's this knowing God's favor and approval of us in the gospel that is at the heart of what it means to be truly blessed.

With that in mind, notice that this back and forth has *disproportion* written all over it. One Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner expressed this discrepancy best, "The exchange 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."<sup>16</sup> What an incredible observation! How can we bless God with our praise and life in a way which expresses sufficiently our gratitude, either qualitatively or quantitatively? We won't even be able to do that in the ages to come, though that still shouldn't stop us from trying, even in these moments. But for God to bless us, in all our revolting desires, in all our defiant tendencies against His rule, in a state of being dead to Him and alive to all that is temporal and passing away—for God to bless us required a wisdom in blueprint before the ages began, and it took the execution of that plan—the very execution of the Son of God dying in our place. And this is precisely the feast we possess in the Gospels and Letters of the New Testament! There, the apostles labor to explain that the benediction of God has exploded in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6 exists as a mere, single flower, beautiful in its own right. But taken in light of what God has done in the gospel, the benediction of God becomes a lavish garden that we've only begun to explore by His grace.

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<sup>13</sup> Proverbs 25:11, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver."

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Matt Sliger, *A Psalm of Blessing*, <http://southwoodsbc.org/media/afxr6kkc/a-psalm-of-blessing>

<sup>15</sup> Some of the beatitudes of Matthew 5 clearly show this.

<sup>16</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 490.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 1 that “*the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*” has “*blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.*” We can figure some of those blessings out from Paul’s pen in that chapter—election, holiness, blamelessness, adoption, redemption, forgiveness, grace, knowledge, an inheritance, the Spirit, hope, insight, resurrection, the church—but is this every spiritual blessing? Or, are these just the robe’s edges? One commentator wrote that Ephesians 1 is “the great benediction of the Bible, an exclamation of praise and prayer.”<sup>17</sup> John Stott wrote that it “[resembles] those benedictions pronounced in Jewish synagogues...[of which Paul was familiar].”<sup>18</sup> Thus, when we hear this Psalm 134 benediction, we now have an ocean of rich truths from which we can draw when we hear, ***May the LORD bless you from Zion.***

### ***B. He who made heaven and earth***

The song ends with a similar line which we find our Lord drawing in Matthew 6. “*Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*” Take your cues from creation. If He blesses the birds, what of you? I think the Maker of VY-Canis Majoris, a star 3 billion times the size of the sun in our solar system—the Maker of that has the power and the resources to bless us.<sup>19</sup> And in the sending of His Son for our sin, He has expressed resurrection power with an unfailing compassion for His image bearers. We can bank on it, with outstretched hearts of praise—His benediction is boundless and unending.

### **Conclusion**

Like all our longed-for destinations here, the short-lived respite on a beach, or a reunion with family members far away, or, for these pilgrims, the holy city of Jerusalem—all those mountain-tops only serve to scratch our most recent itches. The final cure is the greatest blessing that awaits all our tired journeys—resurrection life with a Risen Christ ruling in the absolute, where unshakeable peace and perfect righteousness dwell, where unfiltered joy is freely ours to drink for ages on end. What a future we have together!

Until then, on our way to the new Jerusalem, we keep singing. We long for the faithfulness in us and around us. We must have and need God’s blessing to keep enduring this life for His glory. May we live our lives to bless the LORD—with heart, voice, service, and witness. May we live most centrally in the assurance that He has blessed our lives—with His heart that planned our course of grace, with His Word for all of life, and with His redeeming work that is immeasurable by every conceivable metric that creation can illustrate for us.

Come, bless the LORD, all you saints, from this time forth and forevermore.

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<sup>17</sup> Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, 97-98 (as quoted by Stott).

<sup>18</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.nasa.gov/image-feature/hypergiant-star-canis-majoris>