

**Psalm 134**  
**The Blessings of Discipleship**

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For the past several months, we have been working our way through the songs of ascent in Psalms 120-134. This morning we find ourselves at the very last one, Psalm 134. As God's people made their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, these songs were their traveling companions. These songs give expression to what discipleship means – these songs provide language, perspective, meaning and a framework to understand what it means to live as God's people. These are the songs that God's people sing to be reminded of the truth of God, especially when our feelings don't seem to be in line with this truth. These are the songs that encourage God's people, day in and day out to keep moving ever closer to the one Triune God.

Our journey through the songs of ascent began in Psalm 120 with a word of repentance, a turning to the Lord. It was a cry seeking salvation and help. It makes sense that discipleship starts with a turning to God. Christian discipleship – the way of following Jesus - starts with repentance. Being a disciple of Jesus begins with our turning to God which includes our confession of sin, our confession that we've been trying to do things our own way without God. After all, the first word in Jesus' gospel message is "repent", "turn around". Jesus declares "repent, for the Kingdom of God is near". To be sure, repentance is not only a word or act we do at the beginning of our discipleship. We turn to Jesus throughout our lives, we must keep on turning to Jesus for we know that we cannot live faithfully or obediently to Jesus by our own power and strength. And so we keep turning to Jesus, we keep repenting.

So if repentance is the first step on the way of discipleship, and a step we as disciples keep on taking then where does discipleship lead? What is the culmination of Christian discipleship? Where are we going? Psalm 134 gives us a clue. Christian discipleship leads to blessing.

Now that statement, 'Christian discipleship leads to blessing' can be interpreted in many different ways. Indeed that one word 'blessing' has been used in different ways and misunderstood throughout the history of Christianity. Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a growing movement called the prosperity gospel, or the health and wealth gospel, or the name it and claim it gospel, or word of faith. In short, the view states that God wants to bless us which is to say God always wants us to be materially and financially wealthy and successful. There is a belief that God's will is always and only about our physical and material well-being. To receive such blessings from God, the prosperity gospel teaches we must have faith, practice positive self-talk and speech by saying things like "I am rich or I am strong or I want a new car", and donate our money to religious charitable organizations. Doing that will increase God's blessing and favor towards us, so the view suggests.

The view finds its theological basis from the word 'blessed'. It is the belief that God's will for his people is to be blessed and being blessed means being healthy, being wealthy, being beautiful, being strong, being successful. And so, the prosperity gospel teaches that the Bible is essentially a contract between God and his people. A contract is a legal document wherein if each party upholds their end of the deal, there are clear outcomes and results. For example, if you sell or purchase a home, you must sign a contract. The contract clearly states what the buyer does

and what the seller does. If both parties keep their side, the result is the successful sale and purchase of a home. According to the prosperity gospel, the Bible is a faith contract between God and His people. Because God is faithful and just, then God will give us what we want as long as we keep our side of the contract. So believers must fulfill their side of the contract in order to receive God's promise of blessing. And our side of the contract, so the prosperity gospel says, is that we must have faith, donate money to charitable religious organizations and declare what you want. If we do that, then God will bless us with money, health, whatever we want – a new car, a new house, new clothes, a vacation. If we're not doing that, we won't prosper or be healthy or receive what we want from God.

The prosperity gospel is subtle but starts to make appearances in songs we listen to or self-help and self-improvement books we read or how we pray or how we understand sickness and suffering. It's gaining traction in North America and in our churches and in mainstream culture. Simply look at the books on Amazon or read the motivational slogans plastered on media or listen to songs on the radio.

This morning we get to this last song of ascent, Psalm 134. And three times we read the word blessing. It starts with us blessing God and ends with a pronouncement of God's blessing upon us. Read in isolation, this Psalm could very well support the teaching of the prosperity gospel. Bless God and God will bless you. Do this and God will do that for you. But is that really what this Psalm is teaching us? Is that really what blessing means in this Psalm and throughout all of Scripture?

Let's consider the context of the Psalm. This Psalm is, first of all, part of fifteen songs about discipleship that God's people sang. Many theologians and scholars divide the fifteen songs of ascent into five groups of three. In the first four groups, the first song is a cry of distress - God's people are suffering or in trouble or need help. The second song sung in each of those four groups is a song that affirms God's power and deliverance. The third song expresses the joy of security in God. But the last three songs – Psalms 132, 133 and 134 all speak of the blessing of arriving in Zion and being in the presence of God. And so these songs of ascent, taken as a whole, know nothing of a life full of material possessions, full of wealth, full of health. The songs don't sing of a life that is without sickness or hardship or challenge or danger or suffering. For every song that speaks of blessing, there is a song that speaks of suffering and pain and distress and hardship. The songs of ascent develop a theology and language that makes room for the disciple's experience of pain and well-being, for the pilgrim's experience of danger and protection. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to know and experience joy and pain, well-being and sickness, peace and suffering. If we are not prosperous or not wealthy or not healthy, it does not necessarily mean we are a 'bad Christian' or have lost favour with God. When we remember that this song is sung in the context of the songs of ascent we realize pretty quickly that the song is not teaching us that if we bless God, God will bless us with wealth and health. It is not a song that declares the Christian life is about material or financial prosperity or health.

Secondly, we cannot forget that this Psalm is part of the whole of God's Word to us. The Bible includes both the Old Testament and the New Testament which together is the revelation of God to us. We must read this Psalm in light of everything else we read in Scripture. We must read this Psalm in light of creation, in light of the patriarchs, in light of the life and ministry of Jesus of

Nazareth, in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in light of the writings of the Apostle Paul, in light of the early church's understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in this world, in light of our eternal hope.

Set against the whole of Scripture, we will see this morning that Psalm 134 is not at all teaching us that if we bless God, we will be blessed with whatever we desire. So let's consider what this song is all about. Let's consider what blessing means – what it means to bless God and what it means to be blessed by God.

First, a brief note about language. Our English Bibles miss some of the emphasis in the original Hebrew. In Hebrew, the Psalm begins with “Behold”. Behold is one of those words that says ‘pay attention’, ‘notice this’, ‘listen’. This is an important Psalm. Then the Hebrew word baw-rak is used three times, one in each verse. Baw-rak means to bless. Our English Bibles often don't capture this repetition. Let me re-read this song: *Behold! Bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and bless the Lord. May the Lord, the maker of Heaven and Earth, bless you from Zion.*

Let's consider a few preliminary questions about this Psalm before exploring what blessing means. Who is the audience of the Psalm? Who is the Psalmist writing to or addressing? We know the Psalmist addresses “all the servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord”. In the context of the Old Testament, these ministers are the Levites, those who were responsible to keep watch over the Temple at all hours. Yet we recall from last week that we are

all priests. We all have that oil – oil which is used to mark or identify someone as a priest – running down our head and face and clothes. Peter the Apostle reminds us that we are a royal priesthood. And so this Psalm really is for any Christian disciple. It is for anyone who has repented of their sin, turned to Jesus, and are trying to obey and follow His teaching.

Recall that this is the last song of ascent, this is the last song that made up the pilgrims' songbook. It's the song that's sung when God's people at last reach Jerusalem, when God's people at last reach the Temple, when God's people at last enter the house of God. And the response of God's people – a people who are redeemed, who gather in His house, who share communion with the Living God, who receive God's steadfast love and faithfulness, who have been gathered from their wilderness wanderings and given a name and a land and an identity, who are called sons and daughters of the Most High – the response of God's people is to bless the Lord. These are the people who, in receiving so much, raise their hands and bless the Lord.

What was true of Israel is true of God's people today. He who gathers us from our workplaces, from our homes, from the coffees shops and sports fields, from the art centres and mountains calls us His own. Thus we are all called to bless the Lord. It is the work of the priests – of us – to bless the Lord. It is our work that we 'should show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light'.

Why does the Psalmist tell the Levites to both bless the Lord and to raise their hands? Are not the Levites already doing their duty and responsibility as God's own? After all, the Levites are

taking care to watch the Temple, they are responsibly performing their duties. They are taking care of His house. Perhaps this Psalm again reminds us about the journey of discipleship.

Perhaps this is another reminder to us of the various movements of the heart of the disciple of Jesus. Is it possible for a Christian to minister as priest but to not be rightly devoted to God?

The Psalmist here combines both ministry and devotion: “*Bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord*”. Ministry and devotion come together. The Psalmist links service and communion. Consider the context: those who ministered by night have fulfilled their priestly function. They have performed their job duties and responsibilities. They have patrolled the Temple, keeping watch. They have done their service, they have accomplished their ministry. Yet can service and ministry be fulfilled without devotion and communion with God? Can ministry and service happen apart from our posture which blesses the Lord with hands lifted up in praise? The Psalmist here seems to suggest that devotion and ministry go hand-in-hand. To be a minister, to be a priest, to serve requires also devotion and communion with God. To minister to each other requires that we also bless the Lord, that we worship the Lord, that we are in communion with God.

I think this is sometimes where our feelings fail us. This is where the Psalmist can help us remember that how we feel doesn't always correspond with what we ought to do. Right now it's tax season and many of us are preparing to file our taxes. Gathering all the paperwork and spending the time inputting the numbers may not be something you feel like doing but that does not in fact mean you simply cannot do your taxes. Or many times we may not feel like coming to

church to worship and praise God but the Psalmist says just that: Lift up your hands and bless the Lord. Even if you don't feel like it, bless the Lord! I am grateful that in my vocation, I don't have the temptation to wake up on Sunday morning and say "I don't feel like going to church to worship God so I simply won't go". The Psalmist says "yes, you're doing your work, you're performing your job duties – wherever that may be, whether in a hospital or office or studio or classroom – now bless the Lord, lift up your hands and bless the Lord". You might not feel like it but this is what is good and right for the Christian disciple.

So the Psalmist is writing to all God's people and reminds us to bless the Lord. In fact, three times in this three-verse Psalm, we read about blessing. It is clear that the dominant theme is blessing. The song begins with a command that we bless God and ends with a blessing for us. There are two Hebrew words for bless or blessed: ashre which is only used to describe persons, not God, and relates to one's well-being. It's that sense of blessedness when we flourish because we're keeping in step with God's story of creation and redemption.

The second Hebrew word for blessed is bawrak. Unlike the Hebrew word ashre which only speaks of humanity, the Hebrew word bawrak is the Hebrew word that's used to describe God. It is the word that's used to describe what God does for us. This is the word we find in Psalm 134. We hear it in each of the three verses: Bless the Lord! [...] Lift up your hands and bless the Lord. May the Lord bless you.

There is a difference between holiness and blessedness. Holiness is about God's character – who God is. Blessedness is about what God does for us. God is holy, righteous, perfect, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in love, faithful, just. This is about holiness because it is about who God is. God created us and is redeeming and restoring us. God's Son, Jesus Christ, died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins and to inaugurate God's Kingdom on earth. His death and resurrection reconcile us to God. This is about blessedness because it is about what God has done for us.

In the first two verses, the Psalmist speaks about our blessing God. Bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and bless the Lord. How do we bless the Lord? What does it mean to bless the Lord? Or perhaps the more appropriate question is why would we bless the Lord?

We bless the Lord – we praise God or we extol him – as a result of or in response to the blessings given by God. We bless God because he's blessed us. The natural response to receiving the blessings of God is to in turn bless Him – to praise Him, to lift up our hands in gratitude and thanksgiving.

What are the blessings we receive from God? When we read through the Bible, it becomes clear pretty quickly that blessing is an overarching theme, a central focus, a desire and intent of God for His people. The first time we encounter the word *bawrak* is in the 22<sup>nd</sup> verse of Genesis 1. After creating all the living creatures of the sea and air, God blessed them. In Genesis 12, we

hear about the promise of blessing when God told Abram “*I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.*” Then over 600 times, the word blessing appears in the Old Testament. *May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful.* Many of the Old Testament passages that speak of blessing seem to connect blessing with prosperity, victory, or affluence. Consider Deuteronomy 28. In the first 14 verses, all the blessings for being obedient to God’s commands are outlined, for example livestock and crops will be blessed, enemies will be defeated. Verse 11 summarizes it this way: the Lord will grant you abundant prosperity in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground.” Then the last 54 verses of that chapter outline the curses that will fall on God’s people for disobeying His commands. So is God’s blessing about our being rich, our being affluent, our being victorious, our being healthy?

To answer that, we must recall God’s promise to Abram: *I will bless you. You will be a blessing.* When is this blessing fulfilled? When do we see this promise, this covenant finding fulfillment? In Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul reminds us that the promise and blessing is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Jesus Christ bore the consequences of the curse for believers.

So if the promise to Abram is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, then what are the blessings we receive as God’s people? There are many! The New Testament outlines them, and I will mention a few:

1. In Romans, Psalm 32 is quoted: blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them”. We are blessed because our sins are forgiven by faith in Jesus Christ’s atoning death on the cross.
2. God’s people are “blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ” and inherit blessings promised to the patriarchs.
3. Jesus tells us in the gospel of Luke that those who hear the Word of God and obey it are blessed.

To be blessed by God is to receive God Himself. It is to receive His Spirit. It is to receive his gift of love. It is to receive the joy of salvation. It is to receive the joy of redemption and reconciliation. It is to freely receive the forgiveness of sins. It is to receive His Kingdom.

In both the Old and the New Testament, being blessed by God is used to refer to one who is favoured by God. We know or experience God’s favour not through wealth or health but through the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ and the coming Kingdom of God. After all, Jesus teaches that those who are persecuted, those who suffer for righteousness’ sake, those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are insulted are blessed. We are blessed because the Kingdom of God belongs to us. So blessing is not about our acquiring possessions or wealth or health.

Blessing is about inheriting or acquiring the Kingdom of God.

How does blessing happen? Does it happen because of my faith? Does it happen because I give my money to the right person or the right organization and then God will bless me? Does it happen by me proclaiming what it is I want then expecting God will deliver on that? Biblical blessing does not happen in the context of a contractual relationship. You and I are not in a contract with God. Biblical blessing happens in the context of a covenant relationship. Yahweh God entered a covenant relationship with Abraham. In and through Jesus Christ, we enter a new covenant with God.

A marriage covenant is different than the covenant relationship between Yahweh God and His people. In marriage, the covenant relationship is bilateral. This means that the bond is sealed by both the man and the woman vowing that each have equal privileges and responsibilities. The vows are the same til death do us part. But in the covenant relationship between Yahweh God and His people, it is unilateral. God initiated the covenantal relationship, God decided the bounds of the relationships and confirmed it with his people. We – as God’s people – are recipients of the covenant relationship. We are not contributors – we don’t do anything, we don’t offer anything to God to get something in return from God. We are called to freely accept what God gives, to accept the bounds of the relationships, to keep it as commanded, to receive the results that God promises. This is the blessedness of the gospel. By God’s grace, we freely receive His blessings. We must simply receive, we don’t do anything to earn or get it.

The final verse gives us a clue about what blessing looks like in the life of the church. The Psalmist writes *May the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.* God’s

blessing comes to us from Zion – from the Temple, from God’s presence, from divine glory. Jesus Christ is that Temple. In Jesus, God dwelt and in Jesus, we encounter God the Father. Jesus is the source of revelation and Jesus is the sacrifice. So all that was available to God’s people in Zion – all the good that was made available to the Jew in Zion is available to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus invites us to come, if anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink.

There is a second way of understanding the Temple. The church is God’s temple. In the church, God dwells through his Spirit. So it is the church that bears faithful witness and service to God that then imparts these blessings to the world. Because we have received God’s blessing in Christ, we are to be a blessing to the world. We are to be a blessing especially to those who persecute us for our faith. Jesus teaches “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

Thus, whether we are rich or poor, sick or healthy, old or young, weak or strong, nourished or hungry, unemployed or employed, widow or divorced or single or married, with children or childless, all God’s people can bless the Lord because we have all received his blessings. We are blessed because God has fulfilled his promises in and through Jesus Christ – he has redeemed his people, he has forgiven our sins, he has reconciled us to himself, he gives us life eternal, he has given us his Spirit. This is what it means to be blessed by God. And because of such great blessings, we in turn bless God! Amen!