

Guest Preacher- Rev Gordon Matheson

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Preacher: Rev. Gordon Matheson

[0:00] Would you please turn with me in your Bibles just now back to Psalm 134. Psalm 134, we'll just read it again.

A song of ascents. 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.

May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth. Shall we bow our heads just for a moment in prayer to God? Heavenly Father, as we turn our thoughts for a short time this morning to consider your word in the Bible, we need, Lord, your Spirit to guide us.

We need your Spirit to open our hearts to receive the good news of the gospel that's in these verses. We need the Holy Spirit to help us to apply these words into our own lives and to take the sincere truth of the word and to bring forth fruit according to your purposes.

And so, Father, may you make our time today fruitful and encouraging and a blessing to us. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. So, the Songs of Ascents are a sequence of psalms that were gathered together.

[1:29] They all have that title on them, A Song of Ascents. They're gathered together as a hymnal, almost, of what was sung by Jewish pilgrims going towards festivals at the temple.

And the trajectory of the psalms is really interesting. When you start in Psalm 120, the first of these psalms, you see the psalmist is complaining and basically saying, I live in a house of war.

The people around me are not for peace. They want war. I'm surrounded by people with lying lips. There's deceitfulness. I'm far away, therefore, from all that God's blessing entails.

That's really the picture. It's a picture of someone who is far away from God. And yet, the end of the psalms, of ascents, the last of these songs, Psalm 134, the picture is of arrival.

So, you can imagine the Jewish pilgrims have arrived at Jerusalem. They've come now, in fact, to the gates of the temple itself. They've come all the way up the hill. And now, they are asking the priests to bless the Lord.

[2:35] They're asking the priests to engage in some of their priestly duties. And they, in turn, receive, as we'll see, a blessing from the priests in the Lord's name.

So, they receive the blessing of God in their lives. What they've longed for from the beginning of the Songs of Ascents has now come to fruition in their lives and experience. And I wanted to begin today simply with a point of drawing your attention to that trajectory, to that course.

Because that is the path of salvation. It is the path of discipleship. It is the destiny of every believer, in fact.

So, if today you're not a believer, if today you still haven't come to a living faith in Jesus, this is the trajectory that you need in your life.

You need to realize that there is a place to which you must go. And as I was saying in the kids' talk, that's not a physical place. It's not as if you have to come to a temple or a building or a church.

[3 : 48] It is to a place where God meets with humankind in their brokenness and in their sin, in our ultimate need, and where He deals with these problems.

And that is to the place that we would call Jesus. Because it's not a place, it's a person. Jesus, at His cross, in His death, He dealt ultimately with our sin.

His death takes away our sin. Just as all of the work in the temple all pointed towards, all of the sacrifices in the temple, all of the things like the Day of Atonement, where the blood of a sacrifice was taken and sprinkled over the golden lid of the Ark of the Covenant, the mercy seat.

Where an appeal to God was made in the blood of these sacrifices, saying, only through the shedding of blood can our sin be dealt with. Someone has to die in our place.

And they knew the animal that had been slain outside on the altar, that wasn't the animal that was going to take away their sin. They knew it pointed towards someone else, to something else, to another place in their future.

[5 : 07] A place which is now in our past, the cross of Jesus at Golgotha. Today, if you're not a believer, if you haven't come to that place of peace with God, the place to which you must go in your prayers, in your faith, is to Jesus of Golgotha, the Lord who died for sinners.

And to ask for mercy from Him, that His death will be a covering for you, a means for your salvation and hope.

It's also the path of discipleship. The path of a Christian does not simply begin at the cross, and then just after that, you just kind of amble on until you get called home to glory. The path of the Christian every day is one of coming back to Jesus.

We come back continually in ongoing repentance, because we still sin daily in our thoughts and words and actions. And if we say we're not sinning every day, we're deceiving ourselves. We are living in Psalm 120.

We are people of deceitful lips and tongues. We need to come to Psalm 134. We need to reach a point of having our sin daily dealt with, our spiritual life refreshed and renewed, the blessing of God poured out upon us.

[6 : 26] But also, the trajectory of the Christian life is one of giving glory to God, of blessing God, as we'll see. And so we need to come to Psalm 134 with that understanding, that the goal of our lives as Christians is to bless the Lord, to give glory to Him.

As we shall see. And so whether you are a very young Christian today, someone who's only been following for a short time, we need to embed our lives in this and remember this.

The same too is if you're an older Christian who have been on the road for many, many years. Perhaps today you need a reminder of what's most important. It's one of the great things of coming together to church, is we remind ourselves of the basics, the most important things, and remember that what is most important is that we live for the glory of God, that we live receiving the blessing of God.

And so these things will be foremost in our minds today. The Psalm then, it opens with, as I say, that picture of arrival.

The pilgrims have come to the gates of the temple, and the first couple of verses are almost like their appeal to the priests. So the priests are working in the temple.

[7 : 45] They are the ones, the servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord. And the request of the priests in the ancient religion of the Jews, the priests had a function that they acted on behalf of the people.

The people knew that because of their sin, they couldn't come directly to God themselves. They had to come through an intermediary, a priest. And so they would come to the temple bearing a sacrifice.

Perhaps it was a thank offering. So if they wanted to give thanks to God, they had to come bearing a thank offering to the temple, and the priests would act on their behalf and offer up these thank offerings to God in the name of the people.

And so when they arrive at the temple, they're asking the priests in the temple to bless the Lord on their behalf. They want the priests to engage in this action of glorifying God. It's a strange expression, in fact.

What does it mean to bless God? Well, to be blessed, we know from the language of the Bible, to be blessed means simply to receive all that you need.

[9:00] So the Beatitudes, for example, when Jesus is talking to the crowds in Matthew 5, blessed are the peacemakers and so on, all of these blessings that flow from the life of the kingdom, that blessing, the blessings that we receive from God, are the blessings of receiving all that we need in order to live a fruitful and fulfilled and flourishing life.

And when we say we want to bless God, what we're really doing is we're recognizing that God himself is ultimately the most blessed one of all. He is the one who needs nothing from us.

We're recognizing that God has all that he needs in order to flourish. God himself is the source of all flourishing. And so recognizing the greatness of God, recognizing the wonder of God and the glory of God in all that he has done in the works of creation and in the works of providence and ordering our lives, and ultimately in the work of salvation and drawing us to Jesus and enabling us to see the good news of the gospel, we are blessing God because we're recognizing his greatness, his sufficiency, his power to do what we need in our lives.

And today we do that when we gather together like this. We do it when we have that understanding like we did in singing Psalm 121 today. In fact, the Songs of Ascent, I think, are a prime example of this in the Psalms.

In these Psalms, when we talk about going to the temple, when we talk about looking up towards where our salvation comes from, we are talking actually about Jesus. We're talking about our Savior. We're singing of Christ in all of these Psalms.

[10:37] And we're making much of his salvation, of the fact that in Psalm 121, for example, he is the one who keeps us. He is the one who sustains us. He is the one who watches over us.

The Lord, the covenant God who keeps us. And that's very much the case in this Psalm because in Psalm 134, the blessing that the priests are asked to pronounce is not a blessing merely to God in some abstract sense, that there is the God of Israel, he is out there, we are down here, and we address him.

The name that they address God by is this four letters that are recorded in Hebrew that we translate Lord in block capitals in our Bibles. That is the letters YHWH, Jehovah, Yahweh, as probably the best modern translation would be of that, the announcement of it, the name of God himself.

And it's a covenant name that God has. It's a name that God reveals when he speaks to Moses at the burning bush. When Moses asks and says, who will I say sent me? God says, tell them, Yahweh sent you.

I am has sent you. When God speaks to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs, the fathers of the Jewish nation, it's Yahweh that's speaking to them.

[11:51] And all of that name is bound up in God's promise and commitment towards his people. And so the people, when they come to the temple and they're saying, bless the Lord on our behalf, what they're really saying is, bless the covenant God who has committed himself to us.

Glorify him. And today that's one of these things that we ought to think about, isn't it? That God has made promises to us. That the promise of God is a promise of life in and through Christ Jesus.

It is a hope through Jesus. That the promise of God is a promise of forgiveness ongoing. The promise of the resurrection far beyond the reality of death in this world that may come to us.

There is the reality one day of being raised up and seated with Christ in the new heavens and the new earth. There is the promise of God that he is willing to hear us.

For the Jews singing these words, coming to the temple itself, they're reflecting on the covenant made with David and with Solomon, that God would establish his reign, his rule, and his relationship with his people, and that it would be cemented through them coming to this place.

[13:16] That God would hear them, that God would hear their cries, that God would bring healing to their land in times of distress, that God would comfort them, that God would deal with their guilt, yes, but also deal with all of their situations day by day.

It's to this very place, in fact, that Hezekiah comes with his letter from the governor, from the king of Damascus, when he surrounded the city. And he says, Lord, what are we going to do in this situation?

And the Lord remembers His promise and speaks through Isaiah that there's no threat will come into the city itself. And the king of Damascus flees with his army destroyed.

The reality is, the God that we come to is a God of promise, a God of certainty, a God who has spoken to us and said, all of my promises are yes in Christ Jesus.

And so today, as we sing these verses and as we reflect on what we are doing here today, we're not rejoicing because we've come to this building. We're rejoicing today because we come to Jesus.

[14:27] Because Jesus is the focal point of the worship of God's people. And it's in Jesus that all of God's promises are guaranteed to us. And a down payment is made to us through the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sends.

That today, we experience the outworking of the Trinity as the God of promise. A Father who sent His Son, a Son who purchased salvation, and a Holy Spirit who is now sent to and dwell within the people of God, revitalizing them, bringing the life of God into their very souls.

And so we today can join these pilgrims and we can say, come, bless the Lord. But we can do more than that. Because, excuse me, I have a bit of a croak today.

Because the reality is we are the ones now who stand in the temple of the Lord. The reality of the New Testament church is that there is no longer a separate priesthood.

There is a great high priest in Jesus. And He is the one who has offered Himself as a sacrifice on the cross to take away all of our sins. And now we draw near to God through Him.

[15:37] But today, you don't come to me as a priest and say, well, would you do the hocus-pocus for me so that I can draw near to God? We don't need priests in that function anymore.

Because now, in the New Testament, we are all priests. There is what we call theologically the priesthood of all believers. That all Christians have that access to God through Jesus directly.

And that today, we are the ones who now minister in the temple of the Lord. We are the ones who minister. And it's a great privilege for us because that gives us direct access to God.

We don't stand at a distance. We don't access Him through other saints on our behalf. It's not the role of Mary to draw people into the presence of God through her divine motherhood.

Blessed though she was and blessed though she is as the one who bore the Messiah in her own womb, that is not her role now in drawing people towards God.

[16:38] We don't come via Peter or the popes or the Roman Catholic priesthood that descend their authority through Him. We come to Jesus.

But the strange thing is we now function as priests as well. That means we have an intercessory role today. We have a role of taking the concerns of our, not just ourselves, but of our families, of our community, of our nation, of our world.

We pray for all of these things towards our God. And it is legitimate and proper and right for us to do so because we have a priesthood functional in this building today. We are intercessors.

intercessors. So we take the concerns of the world to our God. But we also take the concerns of our God to the world around us. And as priestly intercessors, we also intercede on behalf of God towards our neighbors and towards our friends.

Perhaps even towards our enemies. And part of that is understanding the context in which all of this is taking place. It's interesting because the function of night in the Songs of Ascents is really interesting.

[17:58] You go through the Songs of Ascents and night plays a particularly prominent role in some of the Psalms. The night, it's a time of obviously darkness. There were no streetlights in the ancient world.

The temple itself would have been relatively well lit. The rest of the city not as much. So the temple is lit by the lamps that are blazing around it in the times of these great festivals. But the ministry of the priests in the temple was often one of working in relative darkness.

They don't see very much of what they're doing. And that remains the case today. The function of priests today in God's church, the function of the church today, is often one in darkness.

that you, if you're a believer today, you're called to minister sometimes in the dark. It might be in the dark experiences of grief and sorrow in people's lives.

As we are blessed to go in to visit people who are suffering, perhaps people who are coming to the end of their life with terminal illness. Or perhaps just the reality that every single person around us is heading towards a dark terminal point and we have lost eternity away from God.

[19:13] We minister in the dark. And sometimes that darkness is the experience of our own souls. And sometimes it is the darkness of the human condition that we struggle through, whether it's the darkness of depression, whether it's the darkness of long-term illness, whether it's the darkness of a dysfunctional marriage.

There are many contexts in which there is darkness in our day-to-day life in which we still minister as servants of the Lord. And so we are encouraged in this psalm to minister there faithfully.

And part of that ministry is what happens in verse 2. The appeal is that they would lift up their hands to the holy place and bless the Lord. And that's an interesting expression.

It's one of a number of different modes of engaging in worship of God that are found throughout the Bible and relating to God and just the physical posture that people come with.

So sometimes when people come before the holiness of God, they lay prostrate on the ground before him. Moses, when he comes to the burning bush, is told to put off his shoes, his sandals, because the place where he stands is holy ground.

[20:37] So he has to come with bare feet. This is an expression of holding up hands. And I think there's a number of different explanations for that.

Perhaps it's the symbolism of having clean hands. Perhaps it's an appeal to a guiltless conscience. Sometimes that's the way we would want to come to God, saying, Lord, I'm being persecuted unfairly.

People hate me. They're making all manner of false accusations against me, just as they did of Jesus. And when we come to him and want to glorify his name, we need to lift up hands. Earlier in the book of Psalms, David talks about those whose hands are clean and whose heart is pure, being acceptable to come into the presence of God.

Maybe that's part of it as well. Today, if you want to come to worship God, if you want to be a worshiper of God day by day in your life, you can't regard sin in your heart. You have to be able to hold up a clean pair of hands.

God is not mocked by our tolerance of sin in our lives. If we're saying to ourselves, I'll just carry on living a sinful life the way I want with my priorities and the things I want to do.

[21:47] We need to confess our guilt before God. We need to confess our sins. We need to have them cleansed and washed away so that we can stand with a clean pair of hands before our God. Or else, perhaps, it's the fact that you're holding out hands in need and desperation, longing for whatever will be given to you so that you will survive and get through the day.

It's a simple picture of dependence. I suppose in either case you're dependent on God, whether it's for the practicalities of life, give us this day our daily bread, or whether it is for the dealing with sin, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Either way, we're holding out empty hands towards God and asking for His blessing and recognizing His need to bless us. So this is the people who are engaged in this.

They're asked to bless God and to do so in a certain way. The other part of the psalm, though, is the situation kind of then flipped on its head.

It's a call and a response. So the first part of the psalm is the pilgrims. They are speaking to the priests to do this on our behalf. And then the priests speak to them.

[23:13] The priests say to them, May the Lord bless you from Zion, He who made heaven and earth. And that's what today we need perhaps most of all.

Quite simply today, we need the blessing of God in our lives. That's what we ought to long for. And today, that's what's available to us.

These are the words of absolution that belong in Christian worship. Not because a priest has acted on your behalf and says, I've done the hocus pocus and now your sins are forgiven.

but because God himself speaks to us and announces his blessing over us. He wants to give us an assurance, assurance that everyone who comes to him, he will never cast out.

An assurance that's given that everyone who confesses their sins will find that God is faithful and just to forgive according to his great mercy. an assurance today that God is saying to each and every one of us, I'm there for you.

[24:34] My mercy is available to you. Receive my blessing. Receive my gift. And that today is what's available to you in and through Christ Jesus.

That if you've come in faith today, you receive the blessing of God. It's a blessing that flows from Mount Zion. Mount Zion, you know, today, obviously, it's a difficult phrase.

It's tied up in a lot of politics. but the reality of the Bible, of the book of Psalms in particular, Mount Zion is simply the place of the temple, the place where God meets with mankind.

And that today, when we talk about Zion in the Old Testament, we're not talking about a place in Jerusalem. We're not talking about a promise given to a literal people to say that they have a literal place that they must for all time hold on to.

We're talking about a promise that is given by God that says that place, that temple, the dealings of God with His people on Mount Zion today is found in a new place where God meets with us, in Emmanuel, in Jesus.

[25 : 52] And in fact, to have rejected Jesus and make nothing of Jesus kind of betrays what the promise of Mount Zion really is. is the great sorrow of the Jewish people today.

Today, though, the blessing of God from Zion is available to us. The blessing of God that comes from Jesus offering Himself as an offering for sin.

The blessing of Jesus given as a Savior taken outside the camp. that is where your blessing flows from. That all the good gifts of God today are available to us from Jesus because He has purchased them for us.

He is the one who has secured them. He is the one who has made them possible. And that's what's available to you today. That's what's yours and mine in Christ Jesus this day.

And God wants to assure you of that. And so, no matter how weary you might be, no matter how exhausted, in fact, the path of discipleship might have been for you thus far, the blessing of God is there and available to you.

[27 : 15] The blessing of God is an assurance to you that says that today there is hope. Today, there is a future. Today, God is promising saying that He is going to work out the fullness of His salvation in your life.

And part of that is the hope of the resurrection. That we are today moving towards a destination. We're moving forward towards God's planned eternal rest for His people.

And the power of the one who says this is undeniable. He is the one who made heaven and earth. He is the one who has done it all.

It's all His. And so, therefore, we can come with a sense of incredible expectation that the things He will do are far more than we can ask or even imagine.

Let's bow our heads then in prayer to Him just now. Heavenly Father, we thank You for the wonder of this great reality that as we go through our lives in a pilgrimage, we are brought to places where the blessing of God is available to us and a place, Lord, where we need to come blessing You.

[28 : 45] And I pray that would be true of every one of us today, that we would all be here, men, women, boys and girls, people who bless and glorify the God of our creation, the God of our salvation, the God of our future and our hope, that we would receive Your blessings in their fullness and an experience of them in our lives.

We ask these things then in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. We're going to sing in conclusion in that psalm that we've been studying, Psalm 134, and sing psalms, page 175.

We're going to sing in verse 1 of the psalm, Praise the Lord, all you His servants, as you serve with one accord.

Praise the Lord in your night watches in the temple of the Lord. Raise your hands within His temple to the Lord, your God, give praise. He who made the earth and heavens bless you from His holy place.

Let's stand and sing these two verses in conclusion. Amen. the temple of the Lord.

[30:30] Raise your hands within His temple till the Lord, your God, give praise.

He who made the earth and heavens bless you from His holy place.

Now the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of God the Holy Spirit be with each one of you now and always. Amen.