

PRAISE
Psalm 134

November 1, 2009 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

John MacArthur stated this concerning corporate worship,

I can tell the depth of any church spiritually after being in their worship service for only five minutes... If the words of the music are unusually experience-oriented, man-centered, me-focused, and so fast-paced that the service more resembles a pep rally than a worship service, the church is, more than likely, shallow and superficial... You must first take a church deep in the Word if you would lead them up high in worship. The depth determines to height. Shallowness in the Word leads to shallowness in worship. Too many churches try to fake it simply by turning up the volume.¹

I heartily concur with MacArthur's assessment. This is not to trash any and every style of music genre that is used in churches today. A drum set and a bass guitar, a praise team or an orchestra, blue jeans and flip flops does not make or break true worship. What does is its focus. Worship is not to be a performance before men but praise unto God. It is not for the entertainment of the congregation but for the exaltation of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It must be done, as John wrote, in spirit and in truth (14:6). Everything that takes place in the corporate worship setting must be founded upon and flow from the Word of God stirred by the Spirit of God.

That is why at Grace Covenant we hold to what is called the *regulative principle of worship*. Simply stated, this principle suggests that nothing is to be allowed into public worship that is not expressly *commanded* and/or *practiced* with God's blessing in Scripture. In other words, Scripture alone *regulates* or *orders* our corporate worship. This is over against the idea of what is called the *normative principle of worship* which states that everything and anything is permissible in public worship that is not expressly *forbidden* in Scripture. I trust you see the difference. That is why every element of our worship service—even the celebration of the Lord's Table that we will participate in together in a moment—is found in the Scriptures and was practiced corporately when the saints gathered.

Our psalm this morning addresses this theme of praise and worship. It is the fifteenth and last of the Psalms of Ascents, and this psalm served to send the people on their way back down the mountain as they concluded their pilgrimage to Jerusalem and their worship together in the temple with their brethren. What we see in this psalm is what we might call the bookends of corporate worship—a call to worship and a benediction.

I. A Call to Worship (134:1-2)

Corporate worship should be the one place where the saints gather on equal ground. We spend most of our hours in the world and I trust not of the world, yet isolated from the body. Corporate worship provides the setting for us to come together, to set aside all the junk we're bombarded with all week, and celebrate our Maker and Redeemer together. **"Behold"** is an emphatic call to attention, literally, "Come!"

¹ In Steve J. Lawson, *Holman Old Testament Commentary: Psalms 76-150*, 312.

1. Its direction (v. 1a)

“Behold, bless the LORD.” It is a reminder for us to set aside whatever it is that might be hindering us to fully experience the presence of God and focus on Him. And lest we miss this Godward direction for worship, the psalmist exhorts, “Bless the LORD.” What does it mean to “bless the LORD?” What does it mean to bless? The word occurs in the Bible over 400 times in some form or another. And the word seems to be associated at least in part as an act of reverence. “To bless” means to consider and to think about all of the wonderful attributes or excellencies of God and to respond accordingly.² It is the invitation of Psalm 100:

Psalm 100:1-5 – ¹ Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth. ² Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before Him with joyful singing. ³ Know that the LORD Himself is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; *We are* His people and the sheep of His pasture. ⁴ Enter His gates with thanksgiving *and* His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him, bless His name. ⁵ For the LORD is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting and His faithfulness to all generations.

Praise and worship are then but a reflection of or response to God—it is to Him and for Him. It is not about us, man-centered and me-focused, but about Him. Then, and only then, can we expect to receive blessing. It starts with Him and ends with Him—for His good pleasure.

2. Its prompters (v. 1b)

This exhortation is addressed first to the Levitical priests who oversaw the temple, “**All servants of the LORD, who serve by night in the house of the LORD!**” They worked in shifts around the clock during these festival times.

1 Chronicles 9:33 – Now these are the singers, heads of fathers’ *households* of the Levites, *who lived* in the chambers *of the temple free from other service*; for they were engaged in their work day and night.

1 Chronicles 23:30-32 – ³⁰ They are to stand every morning to thank and to praise the LORD, and likewise at evening, ³¹ and to offer all burnt offerings to the LORD, on the sabbaths, the new moons and the fixed festivals in the number *set* by the ordinance concerning them, continually before the LORD. ³² Thus they are to keep charge of the tent of meeting, and charge of the holy place, and charge of the sons of Aaron their relatives, for the service of the house of the LORD.

So the priests, the worship leaders, are exhorted to worship God around the clock, a lifestyle morning, noon, and night. Of course, this is the calling of all believers. However, I agree with Boice here, “What we glean from Psalm 134 is the responsibility of the appointed ministers of God to worship God themselves and by doing so to show God’s people how to worship and to lead them in worship.” He continues:

There is no mistaking the fact that congregations learn from their ministers’ examples and will either worship well or fail to worship based on patterns they see. How will people learn to praise God if all they discover in church is a minister who is trying to be

² Derek Thomas,

http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek%27s_SERMONS/Psalms%20of%20Ascent/psalm_134.htm, accessed 10/30/2009.

a stand-up comic or entertainer whose chief goal in the service is to make the people go home feeling good?³

Of course, Boice would not discount the responsibility of the worshipper to be right with God or the fact that there are often unreasonable expectations put on ministers in this matter. However, the seriousness of the vocation is seen in the responsibility the minister has to lead the people to worship.

3. Its posture (v. 2)

“Lift up your hands to the sanctuary and bless the LORD.” The Bible speaks of many acts of posture that are suitable for the worship of God. To stand up, for example, and bless the Lord, to bow in reverence before God, to lift up one’s eyes in expectation of blessing, to kneel, to prostrate oneself on the floor before Almighty God. And the Bible doesn’t seem to say that one is more desirable than the other. But William Hendrickson says this, “the slouching position of the body while we are supposed to be praying is an abomination to the Lord.” I think we are good at slouching when we’re praying to Almighty God—we do have something to learn here about our activity in worship. It’s not a matter of whether we lift up hands literally in worship, that’s not the issue. The issue is an issue of a heart; the issue is one of involvement; the issue is one of sincerity and a desire to praise and bless our God that that in which we are engaged at this point is the most holy and reverent act of all.⁴

Notice again, however,

1 Kings 8:26-30 – ²⁶ “Now therefore, O God of Israel, let Your word, I pray, be confirmed which You have spoken to Your servant, my father David. ²⁷ But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built! ²⁸ Yet have regard to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplication, O LORD my God, to listen to the cry and to the prayer which Your servant prays before You today; ²⁹ that Your eyes may be open toward this house night and day, toward the place of which You have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ to listen to the prayer which Your servant shall pray toward this place. ³⁰ Listen to the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place; hear in heaven Your dwelling place; hear and forgive.

II. A Benediction (134:3)

“May the LORD bless you from Zion, He who made heaven and earth.” This benediction is in the form prescribed in Numbers 6:22-27:

Numbers 6:22-27 – ²² Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²³ “Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, ‘Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: ²⁴ The LORD bless you, and keep you; ²⁵ The LORD make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; ²⁶ The LORD lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace.’ ²⁷ So they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I *then* will bless them.”

We see here the command that the priests were to send the people out with an understanding that God was their God and that His desire was to bless them as they (the priests) “invoked” His name “on” them (the congregation). The priest, then, acted as the mediator between God’s

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107-150*, 1169.

⁴ From Derek Thomas above.

blessings to His people. All mercies come in accordance with His heavenly decree through the priest.

The wonder of God’s amazing grace for us is seen then in this phrase, “**May the LORD bless you from Zion.**” As we noted earlier in relation to God, “**ble**ss” means to consider and to think about all of the wonderful attributes of God and to respond accordingly. The same is true when the Lord blesses us. When God blesses us He thinks about our needs and responds accordingly. That is why the blessing “**from Zion**” is the psalmist’s foremost concern here. As we have noted in our journey through these psalms, “**Zion**” is a picture of the Church, which has Christ as her Head and great High Priest. Just as God blessed His people through the priests here in Psalm 134, so He blesses His Church today, which is His residence, through Jesus Christ the great High Priest. In Christ God blesses His people with all blessings in heavenly places. Is that not what the Apostle Paul taught in Ephesians 1:3? “Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ.” And the same Paul in Romans 8:32, “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, *how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?*”

“**Who made heaven and earth,**” a phrase found two other times in the Ascent Psalms (121:2; 124:8). This should sound familiar to those who have been present in our study on the Apostles’ Creed, which opens with the words, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” This was originally an apologetic statement of Yahweh’s sovereignty over all realms, heavenly and earthly, and by it excluding all claims attributed to the gods of the hills. Where did Paul begin in Acts 17 before the pagan philosophers to show that Yahweh alone is the one true God? God as Creator! When Yahweh made promise of any blessing to His people, with a view of confirming their faith in His ability to perform what He had promised, He often affixed to His name Almighty, “the Lord that created the heaven and the earth,” so that all could know that there exists nothing to great or impossible for God to perform.

Psalm 115:1-7 – ¹ Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to Your name give glory because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth. ² Why should the nations say, “Where, now, is their God?” ³ But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. ⁴ Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man’s hands. ⁵ They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see; ⁶ they have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses, but they cannot smell; ⁷ they have hands, but they cannot feel; they have feet, but they cannot walk; they cannot make a sound with their throat.

Jeremiah 10:10-11 – ¹⁰ The LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure His indignation. ¹¹ Thus you shall say to them, “The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.”

Psalm 146:5-10 – ⁵ How blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, ⁶ *Who made heaven and earth*, the sea and all that is in them; **THEN:** Who keeps faith forever; ⁷ Who executes justice for the oppressed; Who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free. ⁸ The LORD opens *the eyes of* the blind; the LORD raises up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous; ⁹ the LORD protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow, but He thwarts the way of the wicked. ¹⁰ **The LORD will reign forever**, your God, O Zion, to all generations. Praise the LORD!

Here the psalmist moves his eyes from the hills to the universe; from beyond the universe to its Maker who is eternal and infinite; from the gods of nature, which are nothing more than idols, to nature's God. He is the sovereign Creator of all that is. How great, then must the greatness and number of His blessings be! Infinite is the measure of His goodness.

Conclusion

1. Pastors today should heed this call to worship! The devotional puritan Henry Law wrote, "They who lead in outward form should precede, too, in inward grace. They who conduct the hymns of praise should be foremost in offering heartfelt thanksgivings."⁵

John 5:35 – He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.

2. Priests today should heed this call to worship!

1 Peter 2:5 & 9 – "holy priesthood" and "royal priesthood"

Revelation 1:5-6 – ^{5b} To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood— ⁶ and He has made us *to be* a kingdom, priests to His God and Father— to Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever.

Revelation 5:9-10 – ⁹ "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. ¹⁰ You have made them *to be* a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth."

3. All should remember the blessing our great High Priest! May these words ring true for us as we prepare our hearts to worship at the Lord's Table:

Hebrews 7:25-28 – ²⁵ Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. ²⁶ For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; ²⁷ who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the *sins* of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. ²⁸ For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, *appoints* a Son, made perfect forever.

⁵ Henry Law, *Daily Prayer and Praise*, vol. 2, 241.