

# Blessed Worship

## Psalm 134

[Phil Johnson](#)

Open your Bibles to Psalm 134. This morning we say farewell to lots of friends who have been here for the Shepherds' Conference. We're also wrapping up a series on the Psalms of ascent that I began back in April of 2012. That's the longest and most frequently-interrupted series I have ever done in the 20 years I have been teaching in GraceLife. It's actually only a total of 16 messages (because I did two messages on Psalm 127), so if I had stayed with the series nonstop, we should easily have been able to finish in less than a year. But we've interspersed those 16 messages with several other series shorter series; we've often been interrupted by holidays and special events and my travel schedule; and I have *purposely* taken it slowly and in small bits because I like variety, so we have been working through these psalms at an easy pace—and now we have finally reached the fifteenth and final psalm in this group of short psalms that constitute a little book of praise choruses within the larger book of psalms.

And this is the *only* subset of psalms ordered and arranged in this fashion—a group of psalms set apart, all sharing a common inscription. All fifteen psalms labeled "**A Song of Ascents**" are organized sequentially, and that inscription that

appears nowhere else in Scripture. Most (but not all) of the psalms have inscriptions. Some say "**To the choirmaster**" or "**A Psalm of David**," or something else. The inscriptions often tell us who the author was or what occasion it was written for, or what style it is to be sung in. And the inscriptions are, we believe, part of the inspired text. So they are important. The fact that these fifteen psalms are organized as one unit in the canon is therefore likewise important. It's not by accident that they appear all together like this.

If you're looking at Psalm 134, you should have the inscription, as always, at the beginning of verse 1: "**A Song of Ascents.**" The King James Version always translates it "**A Song of degrees.**" The Hebrew word has an interesting range of meanings, and fifteen psalms after we started this series, I don't think we have actually discussed in any detail what the word *ascents*, or the King James Version word *degrees* literally means.

It's a four-letter Hebrew word, *maalah* ("mah-al-AW"), meaning, literally, "things that come up." It can refer to thoughts that come to mind. Or it can refer to an upward grade on a long road, or stairs going up, or the simple idea of ascending. It would apply to any kind of uphill journey. So there's enough ambiguity in the inscription that we can't be totally certain what it means. A few commentators have theorized that it could be talking about the style in which these psalms were sung—so that either the tune or the tempo

or the volume or even the mood of each of these songs was supposed to rise in a climactic progression, like a crescendo, or an ever-rising series of key changes, or a melody that starts low and goes up.

That doesn't really seem to fit the content of all the psalms, though. Most of them are short and focused. Our psalm for today is only three verses with one very specific theme. It's hard to imagine styling it musically in any way that would evoke the idea of an upward progression.

Then there's the possibility that this inscription, essentially meaning, "**songs of things that come up**" might signify that these are random thoughts that just popped into the psalmist's mind, so he dashed off these short verses about them. That might not sound too far-fetched, until you read the psalms and realize that they nearly all share a handful of themes in common—and it is a very focused set of topics. This is not a wild mix of random thoughts, it's a collection of choruses all about worship. Most of them (as we have noted before) mention Zion, or the Temple, or the city of Jerusalem. They all have *praise* as a major theme. They include notes of penitence, some facts of Jewish history, some points of doctrine, some celebratory comments about the blessing of family life, prayers to God for help, thanks to God for His grace, and even imprecatory remarks against the enemies of God. And in that sense they include a good bit of diversity. But the one central theme that ties them all

together is *worship*, and specifically the formal and corporate worship that takes place in Jerusalem, on Mount Zion, in the Temple complex.

Therefore, the vast majority of commentators believe these fifteen psalms were a collection of choruses set aside especially to be sung by pilgrims making the uphill Journey to Jerusalem for the annual feasts. That would make perfect sense of the inscription: "**A Song of Ascents**"—because Jerusalem is situated in an elevated region, and no matter where you are coming from, you have to go uphill to get there.

The psalms of ascent were filled with themes that directly pertained to that ascending journey. The brevity and simplicity of these psalms makes them very easy to memorize. All of them are therefore suited to group singing, even in groups that include children. And the annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem *always* included lots of young people, because it was the highlight of every Jewish adolescent at age twelve (when he formally became *bar mitzvah*—"a son of the law") to travel to Jerusalem for the first time to participate in the feasts. This was a major rite of passage. Luke 2, you'll recall, includes the record of Jesus' first pilgrimage to Jerusalem at that very age. Luke 2:41:  
**his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.**

**42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom.**

Notice the expression, "**they went up.**" A journey of ascent. And this was the common custom of all Jewish twelve-year-olds.

Here's what the *Jewish Encyclopedia* says about these pilgrimages:

Every male Israelite was required to visit the Temple three times a year [This, by the way, is a biblical mandate, given in Exodus 23:17 ("**Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord GOD,**") and Deuteronomy 16:16 ("**Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread** [That's a week-long feast that starts with the celebration of the Passover], **at the Feast of Weeks** [or Pentecost], **and at the Feast of Booths. They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed.**") The *Jewish Encyclopedia* continues:] The pilgrimage to Jerusalem [was made for each of] the three festivals . . . Passover, [*ShavUoth*, (that's the feast of Weeks, or Pentecost), and [*SucCoth*, the Feast of Tabernacles. The pilgrimage] was called "re'iyah" (= "the appearance"). The Mishnah says, "All are under obligation, to appear, except minors, women, the blind, the lame, the aged, and one who is ill physically or mentally." A minor in this case is defined as one who is

too young to be taken by his father to Jerusalem. According to the Mosaic law every one should take an offering, though the value thereof is not fixed . . . While the appearance of women and infant males was not obligatory, they usually accompanied their husbands and fathers, as in all public gatherings. [Still reading from the *Jewish Encyclopedia*:] The Talmud plainly infers that both daughters and sons joined the pilgrims at the Passover festival in Jerusalem.

So large numbers of young people, twelve years old and older would be going up to the feasts every year. The presence of so many juvenile pilgrims is even mentioned by Matthew in His description of the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry. It was Passover week. Jesus was in the Temple complex, healing blind and lame people who came to Him. And Matthew 21:15 says there were "**children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!'**" [and Matthew says when the chief priests and Scribes heard *that*,] **they were indignant.**" This would not have been a random assortment of little toddlers; these were the boys who had reached *bar mitzvah*, (preteen boys on the doorstep of adulthood) gathered in the Temple area to hear the teachers of the law, just as Jesus himself had done at age twelve.

And the number of pilgrims flooding into Jerusalem for every festival is astounding. A Roman governor, Gessius Florus (who was a contemporary of the apostle Paul),

calculated the number of Jewish Pilgrims who came from outside Judea to Jerusalem for Passover one year. He arrived at his figure by taking an inventory of the lambs that were sacrificed. It came to just over a quarter-million lambs. (He had a fairly exact number: 256,500 lambs.) Moses' law required that the whole lamb must be eaten, so this Roman politician figured a minimum of ten persons per lamb must have participated. That yields a figure of 2.56 million people. The total population of Judea could not have been more than 100,000, so if you subtract them from the total figure, it means at least 2.4 million of the worshipers in town for Passover that year were pilgrims who had come from a distance. That's a lot of people who need food and lodging and all the necessities of life, and since the pilgrims came three times a year, dealing with visiting worshipers was a major business in the city. They knew how to handle large crowds.

That figure of two and a half million pilgrims was tallied less than a decade before Jerusalem was sacked by the Roman army. And lots of those who came for the festivals were traveling from as far away as the Euphrates River. Many risked their lives to come, because Rome saw these mass gatherings of Jewish people as a serious threat.

But this was the way of life in ancient Israel, and the annual pilgrimages were major events on every Israelite's calendar. That's why even though there is no external record

anywhere indicating that these psalms of ascent were specifically set aside to be sung on the pilgrim journey, Jewish and Christian commentators alike are generally in agreement that that's what this collection of songs was used for. So we've been referring to them as "Pilgrim psalms," and they make perfect sense in that light. There is no better explanation for why these fifteen psalms may have been grouped together in the canon like this.

This, then, (Psalm 134) is the last in order of the fifteen psalms of Ascent, and it is fittingly an invocation of blessing on people who have come to worship. It's another very short (3-verse) psalm, very brief, and it's theme is the *blessedness of worship*.

In fact, notice as I read it that the word "**ble**ss" appears in each of the three verses. Verses 1 and 2 urge worshipers to bless the Lord, and verse 3 calls on YHWH to bless the worshipers.

Also, you'll see, I think, that this psalm seems to have been written for antiphonal voices. Verses 1 and 2 are for the first voice (or set of voices). It seems to be the voice of the pilgrims who have come to the Temple, and voice 3 apparently answers their call to worship. Verse 3 seems to be spoken or sung by the people mentioned in verse 1, namely the "**servants of the LORD, who stand by night in the house of the LORD.**" These are the priests and Levites who work the night shift at the Temple. So the pilgrim worshipers sing



verses 1-2, and the Temple workers on duty at night answer with verse 3.

Here's the psalm:

**A SONG OF ASCENTS. Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD, who stand by night in the house of the LORD!**

**2 Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the LORD!**

**3 May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!**

Both Charles Spurgeon and Walt Kaiser suggest that this psalm is purposely placed last in the list of Pilgrim psalms because it is the farewell benediction, sung when the celebration is over, just as the worshipers begin their journey back home. Spurgeon envisions a scenario where the pilgrims gather at the Temple just before sunup. Large caravans of travelers would leave on the journey home as early as possible because in that desert climate, nighttime or early morning travel would be preferable to a hard trek in the heat of the afternoon.

And the groups of people leaving Jerusalem would indeed be massive. This wasn't just a single family's road trip; whole communities would join together to travel to and from the feasts. That's how (in Luke 2) Jesus' parents managed to get a full day's journey away from Jerusalem before they noticed Jesus, at age 12, was not with the group. Listen to Luke 2:43:

when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it,

44 but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances,

45 and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him.

So this was a very large group of travelers, consisting of **"relatives and acquaintances."** The word **"acquaintances"** is translated from the Greek word *gnostos*—meaning "well known." These are people who are not part of the family (not relatives), but who are well-known to one another—all the close neighbors and friends from the community. So this was no doubt a large delegation all from the same geographic region. Nazareth wasn't a large town, but even if the total population was just a thousand, this might have been a group of several hundred people. Traveling in large groups like that made good practical sense. If everyone in the community was going, they might as well organize their efforts and travel together. That made the trips much safer and easier—and on the whole it would have made the pilgrimages less stressful and even turned the long trip into a time of fellowship and delight. It would have been interesting to hear these pilgrim songs being sung by wave after wave consisting of very large bands of people.

And when the festival was finally over and it was time for the long trip home, the groups of pilgrims would very likely gather at the Temple in the very early morning hours to get a head start before sunrise. It was the largest, most convenient gathering place in all Israel. (It's easy to see how a twelve-year-old like Jesus, captivated by the Temple and its worship, might get separated from his group and left behind at the Temple.)

Spurgeon believed this kind of predawn gathering of Pilgrims returning home was the setting for this psalm. Walt Kaiser agrees. Here's how Spurgeon painted the scene:

The Pilgrims are going home, and are singing the last song in their psalter. They leave early in the morning, before the day has fully commenced, for the journey is long for many of them. While yet the night lingers they are on the move. As soon as they are outside the gates they see the guards upon the temple wall, and the lamps shining from the windows of the chambers which surround the sanctuary; therefore, moved by the sight, they chant a farewell to the perpetual attendants upon the holy shrine. Their parting exhortation arouses the priests to pronounce upon them a blessing out of the holy place: this benediction is contained in the third verse. The priests as good as say, "You have desired us to bless the Lord, and now we pray the Lord to bless you."

Now, frankly, no one knows for sure whether those were the precise circumstances under which this psalm was sung. It certainly would be appropriate in such a scenario, and the words of the psalm would be uniquely fitting for a farewell worship service involving pilgrims on their way home. So perhaps Spurgeon was exactly right. As I said, Walt Kaiser, who was a superb scholar, agreed with Spurgeon.

But it's also true that this psalm would suit *many* kinds of occasions, including an all-night prayer meeting, or a single individual's visit to the Temple to offer a quiet prayer of thanksgiving in the early-morning hours before sunup, or any event where it might be appropriate to pronounce a benediction on people who are leaving. (That includes the last day of the Shepherds' Conference. So this is an especially suitable psalm for today.)

From the psalm itself it is obvious that many of the details in Spurgeon's hypothetical scenario are exactly what the psalm deals with. It is the night watch in the Temple (v. 1). There is *an invocation of praise, a word of doxology, and an answer wherein a benediction is pronounced*. The verse divisions are perfect. Verse 1 is the call to worship. Verse 2 is the doxology. Verse 3 is the benediction. Thus in abbreviated form, it gives us a complete order of service for late-night prayers or early-morning devotions. It's the very simplest of biblical liturgies.

So let's consider each verse in turn, one component at a time: *The call to worship*, the doxology, and finally the benediction. First—

## 1. THE CALL TO WORSHIP

Verse 1: "**Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD, who stand by night in the house of the LORD!**"

Obviously, that's addressed *to* the night guard and priests who ministered at the Temple overnight. It's not necessarily clear who is speaking. It could be an individual worshiper, a band of worshipers, or possibly even the departing priests from the previous watch. If that's the case, this psalm might be a liturgy for the changing of the guard at the temple. It would certainly work in that way.

Not that it matters a great deal. The important point is what that first verse says. It is *a call to worship*—both an invitation *and* a command to the Temple's night staff.

And by the way, there were always priests and Levites and guards and even musicians on duty at the Temple, and we learn in Scripture that this constituted a very large staff who served in rotating shifts. The Temple was open day and night, and qualified worshipers were welcome to come at any hour. And the night shift was not an afterthought. It was *important*. Remember that Hebrews 9 says the Temple was a copy of heavenly things. The service of the earthly sanctuary

needed to mirror the nonstop worship that takes place around God's throne in heaven.

Therefore people were on duty at the Temple around the clock. And the night shift had to be especially watchful. Here's what 1 Chronicles 9 says about how that worked. There was a large retinue of guards, who functioned as peacekeepers and policemen, stationed at every entrance.

First Chronicles 9:24:

**The gatekeepers were on the four sides, east, west, north, and south.**

**25 And their kinsmen who were in their villages were obligated to come in every seven days, in turn, to be with these,**

**26 for the four chief gatekeepers, who were Levites, were entrusted to be over the chambers and the treasures of the house of God.**

**27 And they lodged around the house of God, for on them lay the duty of watching, and they had charge of opening it every morning.**

**28 Some of them had charge of the utensils of service, for they were required to count them when they were brought in and taken out.**

**29 Others of them were appointed over the furniture and over all the holy utensils, also over the fine flour, the wine, the oil, the incense, and the spices.**

**30 Others, of the sons of the priests, prepared the mixing of the spices,**

**31 and Mattithiah, one of the Levites, the firstborn of Shallum the Korahite, was entrusted with making the flat cakes.**

**32 Also some of their kinsmen of the Kohathites had charge of the showbread, to prepare it every Sabbath.**

**33 Now these, the singers, the heads of fathers' houses of the Levites, were in the chambers of the temple free from other service, for they were on duty day and night.**

Some of the rabbinical records suggest that there were groups of unusually devout worshipers—common people, widows, and the elderly—who were in the habit of visiting the Temple to pray in the night. One of these we meet in Luke 2:37 was a widow named Anna. Luke says this of her: She was "**Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.** [In order to honor her faithfulness, Luke gives very specific details about her that single her out from every other possible person named Anna.] **She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer *night and day*.**"

And the night shift at the Temple did not consist only of guards and janitors. Some of the highest ranking priests were on duty at the Temple overnight, because the burnt offerings

had to be kept burning all night. The sons of Aaron were strictly instructed not to let the fire go out. Leviticus 6:8-13:

**The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,**

**9 "Command Aaron and his sons, saying, This is the law of the burnt offering. The burnt offering shall be on the hearth on the altar all night until the morning, and the fire of the altar shall be kept burning on it.**

**10 And the priest shall put on his linen garment and put his linen undergarment on his body, and he shall take up the ashes to which the fire has reduced the burnt offering on the altar and put them beside the altar.**

**11 Then he shall take off his garments and put on other garments and carry the ashes outside the camp to a clean place.**

**12 The fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not go out. The priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and he shall arrange the burnt offering on it and shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings.**

**13 Fire shall be kept burning on the altar continually; it shall not go out.**

So night duty at the Temple was a responsibility that could not be taken casually. Yet like any ritual or routine that must be done methodically, it could become tedious. It was easy to become inattentive, or succumb to the dullness of repetition, and begin to perform your task mindlessly, heedlessly.



And so we have this call to worship, specifically targeting those whose duty it was to lead in worship.

And it starts with an exclamation. I'm reading from the ESV, which gives this word a translation that in my estimation is much too tame: "**Come.**" It's the same word translated "**Behold**" at the beginning of Psalm 133. It's a word whose design is to seize the attention of the person you are speaking to. It also expresses a sense of earnest importance, and thus it lends emphasis to whatever statement or command or point of information immediately follows it. The sense of it here is exactly like the English word *look*, when used as a demonstrative particle: "**Look: all you servants of the LORD who minister by night in the house of the LORD, Praise the LORD.**" It's telling the Temple staff, *Don't lose sight of what you're doing. Don't just go through the motions. And above all, don't fall asleep on the job. What you are doing is of eternal importance. Put your hearts in it!* And in this context, it seems to me that this is not just a cheery salutation. It's a kind of urgent reveille—a wake-up call. The idea is *"Take heed! Be upon your guard; you serve a jealous God. Give Him the praise due Him.*

So this is more than merely a generic call to worship. It would have been applicable to every person in the Temple, of course. But it is specifically directed at those who have a particular calling to ministry—and thus in a special way it would apply to pastors, elders, deacons, and anyone else who

is serving the Lord in any routine or regular function—men and women alike—high priests and temple guards, janitors, nursery workers, and even the person who sweeps the floors.

**"Bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD, who stand by night in the house of the LORD!"** The Hebrew word for "stand" is used consistently in Scripture to speak of the duty performed by those who served in the Temple. Deuteronomy 10:8: **"the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD to stand before the LORD to minister to him and to bless in his name."** Deuteronomy 18:7 speaks of the **"Levites who stand to minister . . . before the LORD."** Again speaking of the Levites, 2 Chronicles 23:20 says, **"they were to stand every morning, thanking and praising the LORD, and likewise at evening."**

Second Chronicles 29:11. (This is Hezekiah, speaking to the priests and Levites, and he gives them a word of encouragement and admonition that more or less summarizes the message of our psalm). He says, **"My sons, do not now be negligent, for the LORD has chosen you to *stand* in his presence, to minister to him and to be his ministers and make offerings to him."**

Remember, the sacrificial furnishings in the Temple did not include any chairs. The priests *stood*, signifying the unfinished nature of their service. The work of atonement was never really complete until Christ Himself finally

offered "**one sacrifice for sins for ever.**" That's the very point of Hebrews 10:11-13:

**Every priest *stands* daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.**

**12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,**

**13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.**

So our psalm recognizes that all who were serving in Solomon's Temple were *standing*. And the call to worship is specifically directed at those "**who stand *by night* in the house of the LORD**"—the men whose job it is to *lead* worship in the very early morning hours. So I take it as a tacit recognition that anything routine can be too easily taken for granted and done haphazardly. It is also an unspoken acknowledgement that the extra tedium of the night shift magnifies that tendency. It's a formal call to wake up from the listless stupor of that late-night monotony and worship the Lord with the whole heart.

**"Come, *bless* the LORD."** We've talked about the various biblical uses of the word *bless* in the past. The Lord is said to bless *us* when he confers grace on us; or when he speaks well of us; when He bestows some benefit or benediction or advantage on us. Genesis 1:22: **"God blessed [Adam and Eve], saying, "Be fruitful and multiply."** He is said to bless an *object* or *thing* when He sanctifies it by setting it apart for some

holy purpose. Genesis 2:3: "**God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.**" *We bless others* by expressing a hope or a prayer for their good. Genesis 24:60: "**[Rebekah's family] blessed [her] and said to her, 'Our sister, may you become thousands of ten thousands, and may your offspring possess the gate of those who hate him!'**" *We bless our food* when we give thanks for it. Luke 24:30: "**[Jesus] took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them.**"

So normally, to bless something is to consecrate it by saying words or making a pronouncement that confers or invokes divine favor on whatever person or object we are blessing.

How then do we "**bless the LORD**"? We can't confer any benefit or good fortune on Him. We can't increase His happiness. We certainly can't sanctify Him in the sense of adding to His holiness. Nevertheless, we bless Him by saying words that call Him holy—by attributing to Him the honor He is due. In other words, to "**bless the LORD**" is to *praise* Him—to hallow His name and ascribe glory to Him—and specifically, it speaks of praising Him with thanksgiving.

So this first verse is a call to worship—a call to wholehearted, alert, heartfelt, grateful worship, as opposed to going through the motions of some ritual. *Put your heart in it.*

Then in verse 2, he also says, *Put your hands in it*. This is part two in the order of worship:

## 2. THE DOXOLOGY

*Doxology* means "the utterance of praise to God." That's the formal dictionary definition. That's what verse 2 is about. It's both a response to and a repetition of the call to worship we looked at in verse 1. It both *answers* and *echoes* the call to worship.

Verse 2: "**Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the LORD!**" The physical response of uplifted hands is often associated with prayer in the Old Testament. Psalm 141:2 says, "**Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!**" It was a gesture that signified holiness. First Timothy 2:8: "**men should pray, lifting holy hands.**" Because God is holy, those who come before him in prayer must themselves be holy. Leviticus 11:44: "**Be holy, for I am holy.**" Numbers 15:4: "**Be holy to your God.**" Uplifted hands were a symbol that acknowledged the worshiper's need for holiness.

And according to our verse, the hands were to be lifted "**to the holy place**"—meaning *toward* the holy of holies, the place where the ark of the covenant was kept. In Psalm 28:2, David prays, "**Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help, when I lift up my hands toward your most holy sanctuary.**" The Targums (a compilation of Old Testament

Scriptures translated into Aramaic) render verse 2 of our psalm this way: "**Lift up your hands *with* holiness.**" Whether it's "toward the holy place" or "with holiness," the point is the same. This is a physical gesture having to do with holiness, and it's a gesture that generally accompanies prayer.

There's also a special ceremony in Judaism even today known as "*The raising of the hands,*" during which a priest pronounces the formal blessing found in Numbers 6:24-26:

**The LORD bless you and keep you;**

**25 the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;**

**26 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace**

The priest's hands are held palms out in a specific formation. The ring finger and middle finger of each hand are held apart. The thumb and forefinger of each hand are likewise separated. And the thumbs touch. This is said to symbolize the Hebrew letter *shin*, standing for *El Shaddai*.

*Any* kind of physical gesture would have the advantage of counteracting the feeling of listlessness or dullness that our psalm seems to be addressing. In our Sunday morning elders' meetings, the elders always kneel to pray. When I was in college, I tried for awhile to put myself on a faster route to sanctification by getting up at 4:00 AM to pray. It did *not* make me noticeably holier. In fact, (especially in my student years) I eventually learned that a good night's sleep had a

more sanctifying effect than those pre-dawn prayers. That's mainly because when I was experimenting with devotional sleep-deprivation, it turned out for me that kneeling wasn't a posture designed to keep a weary person awake. Especially when I'd been up till midnight studying for an exam. Walking in a circle while praying barely kept me awake at that hour; kneeling practically *guaranteed* I'd fall back asleep.

Hand-raising nowadays has been revived by our charismatic friends. I have no opposition to the practice, as long as it doesn't become an ostentatious equivalent of the Pharisees' long tassels and broad phylacteries—a deed performed mainly to be seen by other people. I fear that's often the case, but there is certainly nothing wrong with raising hands. Here it's the expected posture.

But the point, even in our psalm, is not mainly the gesture, but what it means. It's a symbol of supplication, humility, and childlike dependence. When my grandchildren raise their hands to me, it's a signal that they want to be picked up and held. But it is also a beautiful expression of love and trust and dependency. That same spirit, I believe, is what's behind the biblical use of this gesture for praying.

**"Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the LORD!"** In other words, *Worship God*. And if this is the voice of the Pilgrim assembly speaking (as I'm inclined to think), they are saying to the Temple staff: *Worship God with us*. The

pilgrims had come a long distance for this, some of them risking their lives to visit the house of the Lord. If this is indeed their farewell just before returning home, it makes perfect sense that they would be eager for one last stirring session of corporate worship.

(Those who come to our Shepherds' Conferences will get this. Especially those who come from small or remote congregations in places where believers are a small minority in the community. They often experience here for the very first time what worship is like in a congregation of thousands of faithful, passionate lovers of God. They know what it must have been like for Jewish Pilgrims to have one final, memorable worship experience before going home—even if it had to be in the early morning hours before sunup on the day they departed.)

And that brings us to the final verse of this psalm:



### 3. THE BENEDICTION

Most commentators believe a new voice speaks in verse three. It's apparently written to be sung antiphonally—like a responsive reading in song. This final verse is the Levitical response. Those "**Who stand by night in the house of the LORD**" have heard the call to worship. They joined in the doxology of verse 2, lifting their hands in holiness. And now they respond with a benediction. It's a perfect closing line to this very brief psalm; a fitting end to the fifteen Psalms of ascent; and an appropriate finale for this Shepherds' Conference week. Verse 3: "**May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!**"

Verses 1 and 2 both invoked the worshipers' blessing for the Lord: "**Bless the LORD.**" Here in verse 3, it is a plea that the worshipers themselves might be blessed. This time the blessing comes *from* God.

And by the way, the pronoun is singular: "**May the LORD bless you**"—the individual.

This is not a prayer for material prosperity, but a wish for the joy and contentment that is the birthright of those who have found God's favor. *Spiritual blessedness*. A prayer that God would grant "**from Zion**" the same favor and fellowship with God and His people that the pilgrims came to Zion to find.

He is, after all, "**the LORD . . . he who made heaven and earth!**" So all the blessings we truly need are all at His

disposal. That should be an encouragement. And the psalm itself is given to us by the Holy Spirit as a reminder and a summons to seek those blessings in our prayer and praise of the Most High God. May He **"bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!"**