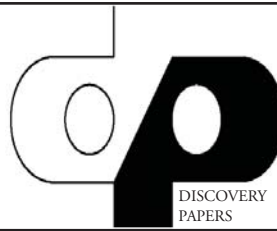


# DRENCHED IN BLESSING

*SERIES: ASCEND*



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Psalms 133 & 134  
11th Message  
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Leslie and I, our son David, and a very precocious four year old spent most of last week at Camp PBC. As we have for more than 20 years, large numbers of folks from this church drove to the foot of Mount Shasta to camp near a lake for a week of fun and fellowship. Away from familiar life demands, living in temporary shelters, attending to God with others who love him—it was marvelous. In many ways Camp PBC was a fitting way for us to end a summer during which we have been learning from the *Songs of Ascents*. In this message we will consider the two short Psalms which conclude the collection of pilgrim poems.

Psalms 133 and 134 end similarly—with an expectation of blessing. Ps. 133:3: “For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore” and 134:3 “May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who is the Maker of heaven and earth.”

Let’s first read and consider the message of Psalm 133.

Psalm 133:

## *A Song of Ascents. Of David.*

**<sup>1</sup>How good and pleasant it is  
when God’s people live together in unity!**  
**<sup>2</sup>It is like precious oil poured on the head,  
running down on the beard,  
running down on Aaron’s beard,  
down on the collar of his robe.**  
**<sup>3</sup>It is as if the dew of Hermon  
were falling on Mount Zion.**  
**For there the LORD bestows his blessing,  
even life forevermore.**

It is a delight to dwell—whether in tents or not—in a loving community. We seek out the place ‘where everybody knows your name’ in the words of the old sitcom, a place where we are welcomed, loved, protected, and appreciated. And Ps.133 goes further. Genuine brotherliness among believing people is not just ‘good and pleasant’—it is a delight to God.

Yet, even though we esteem them highly, loving communities are hard to come by. Eugene Peterson translates the first line in Psalm 133, “How wonderful, how beautiful when brothers and sisters get along.” Though

praised in theory and appreciated from a distance we find that congregations where believers ‘get along’ are difficult to achieve.

There are two images in this psalm that can help us. The first is oil. Abundant oil poured on Aaron. The second is dew from heaven that descends on Mount Hermon. Both images resonate for people in the dry and sun ravaged climate where they were written. If this song were being penned by Eskimos different images would have been chosen.

Let me return to our Camp PBC experience to consider the metaphors of relief from the sun. Temperatures were in the upper nineties at Lake Syskiyou and there was no moisture in the air. For the ancients in comparable circumstances, scented olive oil was a medicine and a fragrance. It enabled a glistening appearance—softening dusty, cracked skin. It helped untangle matted hair, making it shiny and beautiful. Modern campers act in a similar fashion when we use sunscreen, lip balm, shampoo, deodorant, and skin cream. Loving fellowship is delightful in the same way a shower, shampoo, and shade are delightful at the end of a long hike on a dusty trail.

The second of these images is dew on a mountain top. Mount Hermon is located near what today is the border between Israel and Lebanon, near the Mediterranean Sea. It’s the highest peak in the region; high enough to be capped with snow all year round. Jerusalem has a rainy season and cool winters, but for much of the year, water is scarce and temperatures are high. At camp we sought water during the heat of the day: swimming in the lake, wading in the streams, and jumping from a waterfall. Dew from heaven is lovely when the world is hot and dry. We experience a similar loveliness when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity.

Why is vital fellowship so hard to achieve? An old rhyme is close to the mark. “To dwell above with saints we love, oh, that will be glory. To live below with saints we know, well that’s another story.” The problem is human brokenness. Though we can more easily see the faults of others we must first come to grips with our own inadequacies. I create barriers to brotherly unity when I am double minded, deceptive, fearful, jealous, and resentful. In addition, the devil is determined to destroy the work

of God by keeping believers distrustful of one another, facing life alone.

Because of devilish opposition and our own weaknesses we often settle for fake oneness. Two familiar forms of false unity are hypocrisy and surface sameness. We are hypocrites when we paste on smiles at church and learn to gossip with subtlety; when we speak in cheery platitudes and have routine conversations that never get to the level of our hearts; when we speak of love for one another and our claims are never put into action.

Surface sameness is a form of failure as well. Conformity is not unity. Groups that enforce similar views in politics or taste in music are not different from secular social clubs. Brotherly unity is beautiful when it is created by love that crosses barriers; when different languages, ages, ethnicities, social status and levels of education are present but not paid attention to.

Love is the central requirement of godly unity—love that bears all things; believes and hopes and endures all things. Let us turn to a passage in Philippians to help understand what makes love grow. It was written to a community in which personal tensions were threatening unity. Here's Philippians 2:1-11. "Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

"In your relationships with one another,  
have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:  
Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something  
to be used to his own advantage;  
rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

"Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father."

I want to make three observations drawn from this profound, beautiful text. The first is that love for others flows from God's love for us. If we have experienced encouragement, comfort, tenderness, and compassion from God then we should live sacrificially, placing high value on others. Indeed we should rank others above ourselves. Broken communities are healed when each member holds his neighbor in high regard. As recipients of divine compassion we know ourselves to be of great value and because we are free from the need for self-promotion we can raise up our companions.

Second, we are called to put love into action. In addition to holding others in high esteem, we are to look out for their interests. Everyone is born with an instinct for grabbing and butting in, for whining and making demands. We must train ourselves to see the interests of others through their own eyes and to hear the voice of their hopes and dreams. Then the apostle directs me to act on such awareness, to deny myself in active and practical ways in order to put another's interests before my own.

Third, we have the example of Christ regarding the extent of sacrificial love ('to the point of death on a cross') and the nature of the triumph which followed. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus ('exalted to the highest place') declare that selfless love matters to God. He will honor his servants. We should draw on both elements of the Lord's example—the enormity of the price he paid and the glorious final outcome. We are recipients of the immeasurable love of Christ and are called to give away what we have been given—esteeming and serving others. Jesus' cross and resurrection are before us as a pattern of love. Love as Jesus did. Be certain of the Father's reward.

Psalm 133 speaks beautifully of brotherly unity. We long for love to reign in our communities and it is God's will that love should reign. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

Our second text and the last of the Songs of Ascent is Psalm 134. It is short and uncomplicated. It is also mysterious and beautiful – the final song for pilgrims who have been journeying together on the way to the temple in Jerusalem.

Psalm 134:

### *A song of ascents*

**<sup>1</sup>Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD  
who minister by night in the house of the LORD.  
<sup>2</sup>Lift up your hands in the sanctuary  
and praise the LORD.**

**<sup>3</sup>May the LORD bless you from Zion,  
he who is the Maker of heaven and earth.**

We should imagine Jerusalem as a crowded place now that the travelers have arrived for the prescribed festival. For instance, Acts 2 describes large numbers of ‘God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven’ who gathered in the city for Pentecost—one of the three occasions each year when Israelite pilgrims would ascend to Jerusalem. The days of the festival would be filled with activity and bustling energy in and around the temple.

Yet Psalm 134 is set at night when all is quiet. “Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD who minister by night in the house of the LORD.” The sanctuary of the temple was awe-inspiring at all times, but perhaps especially at night—shrouded in holy and reverent darkness. A servant of the Lord lifts his hands in praise in the sanctuary where God is both present and hidden.

Verse 3 anticipates blessing and speaks of God from two vantage points. First, blessing is ‘from Zion’, that is from the temple (which was erected on Mt. Zion) and, therefore, based on God’s promises to Israel. Second, blessing is from ‘the maker of heaven and earth,’ reminding us of divine majesty that goes far beyond human history. The Creator’s power and authority are immeasurable. Yet, his focus is not on the far horizon, but on an individual with a full heart standing in a darkened sanctuary with his hands raised.

We have come to the end of our studies in the pilgrim’s songbook, the *Psalms of Ascents*. It began with the first verse of Ps. 120—“I call on the Lord in my distress and he answers me.” This is the cry of a lonely man in desperate circumstance who begins a journey toward the presence of God.

The last verse of the songbook is Ps.134:3, “May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who is maker of heaven and earth.” These words are spoken in the temple sanctuary, a place of holy intimacy with the Lord. The pilgrim’s desperation has been replaced by praise. May these songs be life changing for us as well.