

“The Blessings of Togetherness”

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If you use only your ears in worship, you're missing so many blessings!

Psalms 133-134

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Just your ears?

The direction of this sermon was shaped by two experiences and relationships. The more recent one was a visit to The Natural Olive, a shop in downtown Hickory selling forty different varieties of infused olive oil, along with balsamic vinaigrette and other kitchen and home products. Our daughters had come home for Thanksgiving, and had mentioned wanting to stop by The Natural Olive to pick up some gifts. As it turned out, Noelle Walker, who owns the store, and her husband Josh had just been in my office a week or so before, since they are joining Corinth in December.

My pattern until now has been to avoid the oil and vinegar when a restaurant serves it with the bread, I've often asked, "Could I just have some butter?" The server inwardly huffs but politely brings it. My mom says when I was a little guy I would climb up on the refrigerator, find the butter, and eat it plain. Now that I have smelled and tasted the varied possibilities of oil and balsamic, I'm a convert. That Natural Olive multi-sensory experience of oil and vinegar is so biblical, as we will see shortly.

The other experience is longer term. My colleague and associate pastor, Paul Cummings, has always been passionate about teaching not only the Bible but worship on Sunday mornings. His love for worship words in the Bible is a key reason we chose the Psalms for our sermons in November and Advent.

As a contemporary worship leader, Paul particularly loves those Hebrew words that imply physical action in worship –

- *Shabach*. This word can mean to “shout,” but there’s an irony to it because it also means to soothe. “You *still* the surging sea” (Psalm 89:9). It means to shout in order to calm. I picture myself raising my voice to my Confirmands: “Be quiet!” What a beautiful picture of worship – that I raise my voice not to calm God but to calm myself.
- *Gil*. It means to rejoice, but there’s an action involved – going around in circles, spinning. “Rejoice with trembling” (Psalm 2:11). We would just say “to dance.” In other words, you’re not “gil-ing” if you’re just sitting and smiling. You have to move!
- *Yadah*. This word is usually translated “thank” or “confess” or “praise,” but it’s a verb form of the noun “hand.” In other words, when the psalmist says, “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good” (Psalm 136:1), he’s saying, “Use your hands to show your thanks – put them out, raise them. Do something.”
- *Barak*. The usual translation is “bless,” as in, “Bless the Lord, O my soul” (Psalm 133:1). Again, though, the root of the word implies a physical posture – in this case, to “kneel.”

To put these two experiences together, if you use only your ears in worship, you’re missing so many blessings! That’s the lesson of Psalms 133-134.

Togetherness (Psalm 133)

*1: A song of ascents. Of David.
How good and pleasant it is
when God’s people live together in unity!*

The psalm’s title says this Song of Ascents is “of David.” It could have been written by him or about him precisely because neither David’s brothers nor his sons experienced much unity. Instead, there was jealousy and even murder in the family. Sometimes what you don’t have makes you pine for it.

I like the word “Behold” at the beginning of verse 1, left out of most translations. It’s another physical word, it’s an action word. “Look! Pay attention!”

Even before David gives us main topic, he tells us it is “good” and “pleasant.” What do those words mean to you?

“Good” is good word. It’s a common word in the Old Testament, starting with the very first chapter. Every single one of the first six days of the creation story end with, “And God saw that it was good.” Notice the word “saw.” It’s about the senses. The word “good” is a sensory word everywhere in the Old Testament. It’s used of a beautiful woman (Genesis 26:7). We would say she’s “easy on the eyes.” It’s used of things that smell good or taste good or feel good.

“Pleasant” is a happy word. It means “delightful,” and is used of music. If your spirit soars when you hear the Hickory Choral Society or sing along with David Crowder, that’s “pleasant.” “Good” is a physical response, “pleasant” is an emotional response.

What is “good and pleasant,” David? The word “unity” isn’t in the Hebrew, and I’m not sure it belongs in the translation. It was my Jewish commentary that pointed this out. The Hebrew is succinct: “Behold, how good and how pleasant for brothers to dwell again together.” The focus is not on the subjective experience of unity – that you agree with others or are having fun. It’s being together.

My Jewish commentary says this psalm is about encouraging the repopulation of the city of Jerusalem after the exile. In this view, it’s about what we would call downtown revitalization or urbanization. Togetherness! Or, maybe it’s about the experience of those pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem for the festivals. Their daily life is one of isolation on their farms and in their towns, but they tended to travel in large groups. Maybe they’re just singing like you do when you gather the family for Christmas carols. “I love being together.”

*2: 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.*

Now the psalm takes a turn that seems very odd, at least to me. There’s little about the experience of having oil poured on my head that is attractive, much less so if there’s so much of it that it drenches my beard and runs on to my clothing.

So what’s this all about? The mention of Aaron means it’s about a very public ceremony (Exodus 29). Exodus 30 even describes in some detail what Noelle would call “infused” oil – oil blended with fragrant spices. The fragrance disseminated into the gathered community.

Oil was used in the consecration of priests and kings, but Aaron was the very first high priest. His long beard represented dignity and holiness, and watching the oil flow through the beard on to his clothes would have been a ceremony connecting the gathered people in a very visual way. Dotting his head with a spot of oil wouldn’t do it.

I read a little about oil use and production in ancient times, and it very much paralleled what Noelle Walker shared with me about oil use and production today. The olive tree grows plentifully in the thin soils and climates of the Mediterranean rim. The process of picking and processing the oil requires careful attention and preparation by families and communities. Properly done, the resulting oil is and was used for cooking, cosmetics, medicine, and fragrance. Oil is about togetherness – planning, working, and enjoying being in community.

So when you read Psalm 133:2, don't think of oil as mess. Think about a fragrant symbol of God's people loving their togetherness. It's about joy. Think of the familiar words of Psalm 23:5 – "You anoint my head with oil." Isaiah 61 is that Messianic passage Jesus himself quotes at the beginning of his ministry – "The Spirit of the LORD is on me." The text goes on to use "the oil of gladness" as an image. Oil is joy, refreshment, delight, and blessing – all shared "together."

*3: It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the LORD bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore.*

The second illustration for togetherness is in verse 3a. Mount Hermon is the highest peak in Israel, about 120 miles north of Jerusalem. At 10,000 feet its summit is usually snow-capped, and its melt feeds the Jordan River, refreshing the entire watershed. It's also known for dew so dense it feels like rain every night.

Jerusalem, by contrast, is rocky and barren and gets virtually no moisture from rain or dew for about six months of the year. David says togetherness is like taking all the refreshing water and fertility from Hermon and dropping it into Jerusalem.

Once again, Jerusalem is the focus. "For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore." The Psalms of Ascents are about the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for worship. This psalm is about God's people enjoying the journey together into his presence, where there is "life forevermore." How good and how pleasant it is!

The key word is "down." Oil flows down from Aaron's head to his beard to his clothes. Dew comes down. God's blessings come down.

Blessings (Psalm 134)

The theme of Psalm 134 is "bless." That's one of Pastor Paul's "worship words," *barak*. Once again, it's obscured in many translations. The reason is probably that we don't use the word "bless" with the same range of meanings as the Bible did.

Words change. And words mean different things in different places. If you're not from 'round here, you might think that when you show up on the wrong day for your doctor's appointment and the receptionist says, "Well, bless your heart," she's being nice. Really, she's saying, "You're an idiot, but I'm going to say it nicely."

The Hebrew word *barak* is used three times in Psalm 134. The first two are translated "praise" in verses 1-2.

*Praise 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 *praise* the LORD (emphasis added).

Remember, the word means “kneel.” That virtually defines worship. There’s an appropriate physical posture before the King of kings, the Lord whom you serve. “Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices! O night divine, O night when Christ was born.”

The psalm addresses priests, specifically those “who minister by night.” As the crowds disperse from the festival, there may be a temptation for the priests on duty to relax their sense of responsibility for worship. God is a 24/7 God, and the priests rotated through the night watches.

The verb for “lift your hands” is different than *yadah*, which I mentioned earlier, but it’s the same idea. Get your body into it.

May the LORD *bless* you from Zion,
he who is the Maker of heaven and earth.

When you understand that the root behind “bless” is “kneel,” what does it mean that God blesses us? Does he kneel before us? Well, yes. The word “bless” came to mean conferring a gift – in words or action or a tangible object. We kneel (literally or figuratively) before God with the gift of our words and offerings and lives as we “bless” him. But God, the Maker of heaven and earth, blesses us whenever he stoops to pay attention to us.

And, of course, the Advent/Christmas message is that the greatest blessing of all is the incarnation, when he stoops to become one of us. Jesus is the new Zion!

Bringing worship

In their original context, the Psalms of Ascents are about the climb to Jerusalem. It may have been about festivals, but it applied to every act of moving toward the temple, because the place represented the presence and majesty of God. We may experience God’s presence in this place, but this place is never about this place. As I said Friday at the memorial service for Charles Moss, who was Hickory Construction Company’s project manager when this building was built in the 1950s, the symbolism of this place is majesty and permanency.

What lessons do we take from the Psalms of Ascents?

Bring your whole self. In some traditions, there’s a lot of emphasis on kneeling, and in others a focus on raising your hands. You can do either and miss worship, or do neither and meet God. But this great variety of physical and sensory words in the Bible teaches this one lesson: if you use only your ears in worship, you’re missing so many blessings! A multisensory experience is so very biblical: “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8).

It would be a mistake, in my view, to turn any one of these Hebrew verbs into a law, judging yourself or especially others. The variety of words including bowing, clapping, kneeling, shouting, extending hands, falling prostrate, singing, looking, smelling, tasting, and more. Ultimately it's about engaging your heart and mind, then your body and will. It's a New Testament thing as well. "Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, which is your acceptable worship" (Romans 12:2).

Why? Because what you do with your body will affect your heart. Your actions can alter your feelings. If you say, "I just don't feel like worshipping," bring your body and worship anyway. Kneel, lift your hands, clap, sing, shout, stand. If you wait to worship with your body until you feel it, you may wait a long time. Do it so you can feel it.

Share the priesthood. Both of these psalms use priestly imagery: Aaron as high priests, and the servants of the LORD who minister in his house. Eugene Peterson reminds us that this points us as followers of Jesus to the priesthood of all believers. One of the reasons you need to be here in community is that isolation will destroy you, depress you, defeat you. You need the priests down the pew to encourage you, to correct you, to teach you.

Peterson says, "No Christian is an only child." He reminds us of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's marvelous little book, *Life Together*. Creating a community of seminarians underground in Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer said, "The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him...The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain; his brother's is sure." Your sisters and brothers keep you on the ascent toward the life-changing presence of God. It's not just about worship – you also need friendships and small groups – but it is about worship too. We need you and you need us.

Make it your delight. It's not my responsibility to make your worship happy. It's yours to come with expectancy, to come prepared to ascend into the Lord's presence. Worship is about an encounter not between you and me, but between you and God. If the music is not your style or the worship format doesn't fit your expectation, then come the next week with a different expectation.

In other words, the ascent to worship is yours to choose. You can decide to stay at home and not join the journey, or you can rise to the occasion. You can open yourself to the Holy Spirit, asking him to descend to you. You can prepare in advance by reading this week's Scripture and praying. You can come early and with expectancy. You can look around at the symbols of faith and the people. You can touch somebody.

The Psalms of Ascents remind us over and over again, if you come bringing worship instead of demanding worship, you will meet God. Amen.