

NIGHT SERVICE

PSALM 134

Introduction:

This psalm has a dramatic setting. It is the last of the ascent Psalms—the closing admonition from the worshippers to those who serve. The worshippers have just finished a joyous festival in the presence of the Lord, and they are preparing to make their homeward journey. Before leaving the temple they sing one last psalm.

It may be that this psalm was sung by the pilgrims as they finished a day of festivity and worship in the temple. As they prepared to leave the temple mount, they would turn and sing this psalm to the priests who would be serving through the night. It was a musical challenge for them to give their best to the task of ministering in the temple while the rest of the world slept.

According to ancient documents from the Jewish people, such a priest would receive his assignment by the casting of lots. It literally fell “his lot” to do night duty. He would serve along side others in keeping guard over the temple through the night, and of making some important preparations for the next day. It was not an appointment for which men longed. No one sent in a resume hoping to be appointed to “night service.” The pilgrims knew the

challenge that the “night crew” faced, so they sang this psalm of challenge and encouragement to them.

This psalm has challenged me. Many of us will find ourselves with assignments that do not carry a lot of glamour with them, and not the preferred places of assignment. These pilgrims have a word for you. They have a word for my heart when I find myself in such a situation.

Service in retirement years could be labeled Night Service. In retirement many ministers find themselves moving from the spotlight to a less prominent place of service. Instead of preaching to thousands, they may be preaching to hundreds. Instead of preaching to hundreds, they may be preaching to tens. Instead of leading a large organization, they may be assigned a rather thankless task. They may move from day work to night work.

Some of you pastor churches that no one else wants. You may be the only God-called man on earth who would consider serving where you serve. If you were to leave, the church might fold. It is definitely “night service.”

Some Sunday School work can qualify as night work. You find yourself with a small class to teach, maybe even a small unit of children or pre-

schoolers. You may wonder some time if anyone knows you are there. Let us learn from the pilgrims. Let listen to their song of ascent.

I. NIGHT SERVICE CAN BE LESS DESIRABLE.

I suspect that on the day they cast lots for the assignment for the next month, you could hear a groan when the lot was cast for the night duty. No one wanted the job.

1. Night service is physically challenging.

When I was a youngster, my father took a job that called for him to work the night shift every third week. He would leave home about 9:30 in the evening and return the next morning about 8. He never enjoyed the third shift, or night shift. He did tedious and dangerous work in a defense plant where they produce explosives, but his body was never quite as alert at night. He could never sleep very well in the day time.

This was the lot of the priest. After a fitful day of rest, he took his post in the temple. It was often a challenge to just stay awake, but he was laboring in the temple of the living God. It took discipline to stay alert and diligent on the night shift.

Most of you serve in places in which you are on call every night. Thankfully the telephone does not ring every night, but it does ring. My last fifteen years of pastoral work I was blessed to serve in a church where I had a staff

person to take those calls, but I can still remember the calls—sometimes from an alcoholic that you have been trying to help, sometimes to announce a death in a family, sometimes crying out for help with a family crisis. There is probably not a pastor here who does not know his way to the emergency room in the middle of the night in the local hospital. You are on the night crew.

2. Night work can be emotionally challenging.

The crowds are not there to encourage.

The priests who served on the day shift were in touch with people. They heard confessions, offered sacrifices, participated in the feasts. But at night there was just darkness—no worshippers. No beautiful music ringing out from the choir. Just a few other sleepy priests to keep you company through the night. You delivered no sermons—you just keep watch and prepared for others to enjoy the good things the next day.

Do you feel like that is where you are? Are you on night shift?

Have you ever thought that it must great to serve where everyone in town knows who you are because your services are televised? Sermon preparation might be easier if you knew you would preach to thousands, or even hundreds, but you know that you will face the same sixty, unless one of the families has sickness—and then it will probably be fifty. There has not been

a visitor in the service in six weeks—the same old crowd week after the week. You have drawn the lot for night service.

3. Night work can be professionally challenging.

I would think that the excitement in Old Testament priesthood would involve participating and even leading the great festivals of Israel. Can you imagine the excitement that filled the temple on the Day of Atonement when the annual ritual of Atonement was performed? Or can you imagine the hustle and the bustle of a Passover week when Jerusalem was filled with worshippers, and thousands of lambs were been sacrificially killed by the priests? Sure it was hard work, but it was excitement. It could be that you would even offer a sacrifice for the royal family on such an occasion—that would be something to tell your family about!

Can you imagine having been assigned night duty on Passover week? By the time you go on duty, the meal has been prepared and eaten. Your task is to make sure the doors are secure, the kitchen where they bake the bread for the next day has been cleaned up, and that the lambs are in the place for the morning sacrifice. You will not offer the sacrifice, or serve the bread, just make sure it is in place. Some one else will do the exciting part!

Does that sound like your assignment? You change diapers in the nursery!

You play with and teach two-year olds who will not sit still. You teach an

old ladies class where they cannot remember your name. You are a secretary in your department, and never have an opportunity to contribute to the lesson. No one cares what you think—you have night duty.

It surely does not add to your resume to have night duty listed. It will never get a call from another search committee to have the Unity Church Number Two on Possum Creek listed as one of the places where you served.

Not only does the Executive Director not know your name, even your Director of Missions has difficulty remembering who you are. You have not been asked to lead in silent prayer in the denomination for all the years you have served. It is emotionally challenging when you are on the night shift.

II. NIGHT SERVICE HAS ITS OWN RESPONSIBILITIES.

It was the reality of night duty that led to the psalm. The pilgrims wanted to remind the night priests that they did have responsibilities, and they were important.

1. You can bless the Lord at night.

“Behold, bless the Lord.” “Behold” is translated by some “Come.” But the idea in the word is to command attention. It is calling for special attention to be given to the blessing of the Lord.

The admonition is to “lift up your hands to the sanctuary, and bless the Lord.” To lift up the hands and to bless the Lord includes giving to the Lord

praise. The Lord of the temple deserves to be praised all of the time, even at night. He deserves to be praised in all places. If anyone is to offer praise, or to lead the people to praise the name of the Lord, on your side of the mountain, it will probably be you. No one will ever notice or give you recognition, but the Lord deserves to be praised by the night crew. Amen!

2. You can pray at night.

To “lift up the hands to the sanctuary” probably includes intercession and supplication as well. While the night crew was guarding the temple, and protecting the treasures stored there, they could also be lifting up the Lord strong prayers. Prayers in such a place and time seem to be especially powerful.

3. The Lord knows, whether the people know or not.

III. NIGHT SERVICE BRINGS ITS OWN BLESSINGS.

Interpreters are not agreed about how to understand this last word of encouragement. Some understand it as a word of blessing spoken by the night crew to the pilgrims who have just sung to them. I prefer to hear it as a word of blessing that comes from the pilgrim that is conferred over the night crew. It is a reminder that there are special blessings that come to the night crew.

1. They are great—from the Maker of heaven and earth.

“May the Lord bless you from Zion, He who made heaven and earth.” When the Maker of heaven and earth bestows a blessing on you, you have been blessed.

2. They are spiritual—out of Zion.

“out of Zion” probably indicates that they are spiritual. “Zion” is the place where the Lord God was enthroned in Israel. Out of Zion came the spiritual blessings of the Lord.

Randy Barnett drew the lot for the night crew. The Lord moved him to Wyoming more than twenty years ago, and entrusted him to him a little congregation about forty miles from Casper, the nearest town. The little community has about 12 houses, and is in the midst of some lakes and large ranch country. Our church in Lubbock helped them have a church building several years ago. Alice and I spent a weekend with him and this little church a few years ago.

He also pastors another little congregation on the other side of Casper that has about 20 worshippers. The Lord put Randy there and left him. He is not sending out any resumes hoping to make a move. He is just making sure that the Lord is praised in those little communities, and that petitions are being lifted toward heaven. He is going to give night work his very best.

Alice and I went to village church in Romania when we were there this past May. The pastor and his wife actually pastor four little village congregations. His monthly income is less than two hundred dollars. Yet we went for me to preach on baptizing Sunday. The little village church had 90 baptized members, but that morning he baptized 9 new converts. There must have been close to 300 people there for the baptizing. I have never seen such a crowd in such a small space. The pastor is on the night crew, by the will of God, but he is making the most of his assignment.

ALTERNATIVE OUTLINE

I. EVERY TASK UNDERTAKEN FOR THE LORD DESERVES OUR BEST.

1. Because of Who you serve.
2. Because of Where you serve.

The rebuke given the priests by Malachi. Their service to the Lord did not match their service to the governor.

If those on the night shift do not perform their tasks, no one will.

II. EVERY TASK UNDERTAKEN FOR THE LORD PRESENTS OPPORTUNITIES.

1. You can lift up your hands in prayer.
2. You can lift up your heart in praise.

III. EVERY TASK UNDERTAKEN FOR THE LORD BRINGS
BLESSINGS.

1. The blessings will be great because they come from a great God.
2. The blessings will be spiritual because they come from Zion.