

Hugo Bouter

Spiritual growth in the pilgrim songs, or the Songs of Ascents

Psalms 130 to 134

"But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared."

Psalm 130:4

Out of the depths

In the pilgrim songs or the songs of ascents, we see how God gradually, step by step, brings about redemption for His people. First of all, this involves the outward deliverance from the adversaries and the return to Zion, the place where God has made His name to dwell. But this also involves an inner redemption and an increase in the knowledge of God and of His will. We see this especially in the last songs, Psalms 130 to 134, which we now want to study. The spiritual growth that we can observe here can be typified as follows:

1. awareness of sin and forgiveness (Ps. 130);
2. peace with God (Ps. 131);
3. fellowship with God in His dwelling (Ps. 132);
4. mutual fellowship in God's house (Ps. 133);
5. worship in the sanctuary (Ps. 134).

The starting point of our spiritual growth is the awareness of being a lost sinner in the light of the holiness of God. In Psalm 130, we hear someone cry out to God from the depths of his need: 'From the depths I cry out to You, O Lord' (Ps. 130:1). Who can exist before a holy God, when He remembers our iniquities and would deal with us according to our transgressions?

'But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared'. That is the glorious answer to our need (Ps. 130:3-4). There is forgiveness to be found with the God who must judge us, before whom we cannot stand. He grants this forgiveness freely by virtue of the atoning work of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. What is the practical result of it? That I am now a child of God, willing to serve Him and walk before Him in newness of life. I expect His help and put my trust completely in Him.

This leads to the next stage in our spiritual growth: we have obtained peace with God, and we also walk practically with the peace of God in our hearts. In Psalm 131, the poet is completely at rest, like a child that has been weaned from his mother's breast. All his desires have been satisfied, and he is happy in the Lord. In New Testament terms, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:1-2). There is nothing left to be desired. We have received peace with God, and moreover, the peace of God fills our hearts and minds (Phil. 4:7).

In the sanctuary

The great salvation in which we share, however, has consequences not only for ourselves but also for the community of the believers. It is an important stage in our spiritual growth when we realize this. The doctrine of the justification of the sinner in the letter to the Romans is followed in the New Testament by the point of our common responsibility as members of the church here on earth; and this is found in the letters to the Corinthians.

This aspect of our redemption is presented in Psalm 132. God now dwells here on earth in the midst of His saints, and He finds a resting place there: "Arise, O LORD, to Your resting place, You and the ark of Your strength" (Ps. 132:8). So not only do we find rest in Him, as we saw in the previous psalm, but God also finds a resting place in the midst of all those who belong to Him. And we must prepare this place for Him, as we gather around Him in our assembly meetings, for this subject is highlighted here from the point of our responsibility! Just as David and the people gave the ark of the covenant a place of honor on Mount Zion, so we must give Christ His rightful place in the midst of His own. That is our duty as believers. And then further blessing also depends on our obedience to God's revealed will, although grace alone is the foundation of our faith (Ps. 132:12-18).

So we enjoy fellowship with God in His house here on earth. As a result – and this is the point addressed in Psalm 133 – we will also persevere in fellowship with one

another and live together as brothers and sisters. We then form together a priestly family, blessed from above. For this the poet uses the image of the anointing oil, running down from the head of the high priest on the edge of his garments (Ps. 133:2). Thus we receive from Christ, our Head in heaven, the High Priest of our confession, the anointing with the Holy Spirit. The exalted Christ has poured out His Spirit on the church. Then this heavenly blessing is also represented by the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion (Ps. 133:3). How barren would our life of faith be without the refreshing, vivifying action of the Spirit!

All of this leads to the climax of our spiritual growth in Psalm 134, where we approach God as worshippers in the sanctuary with offerings of praise and thanksgiving. When we are a priestly family and have been richly blessed by God, would we not desire to come to Him and bring Him the sacrifices in which He delights? And for this purpose Christ Himself is also in our midst, and He raises the song of praise in the midst of the redeemed (cf. Ps. 22:22; Heb. 2:12; 10:19-22; 13:15-16).

Noteworthy is the addition, "who by night stand in the house of the LORD" (Ps. 134:1). It is still night in the world where we live, which has rejected the Lord Jesus. But in God's sanctuary there is light: the light of the gold lampstand is burning. In the house of God, the church of the living God, we have light because the Holy Spirit dwells and works here. God is honored here by the people He has made His own. There is light, while the world is still shrouded in darkness.

In the sanctuary one realizes that a new morning is going to dawn, and that Christ will appear as the Sun of righteousness. Then He will establish His rule on behalf of God the Most High, and blessing will extend from Zion to the ends of the earth (Ps. 134:2-3). What a privilege to have this worship before God in the heavenly sanctuary, while it is still night in this world! Worship is the highest privilege we know. We once were lost sinners, crying out to God from the depths of our need. But He has made us worshipers, who can praise Him now in the heights of the sanctuary. Let us not forget this and always offer Him the song of praise He is worthy to receive!