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Psalm for the Night Shift

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Psalm for the Night Shift

Abstract

"Night shift work isn't glamorous. It is often thankless work, the kind that goes unnoticed when it is done well, and is commented on only when it is not completed as expected. The same is true for the night shift in the house of the Lord: we don't often think about it."

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A Psalm for the Night Shift

 inallthings.org/a-psalm-for-the-night-shift/

Leah Zuidema

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. May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who is the Maker of heaven and earth. Psalm 134

Psalm 134 is a short little song, and it can be easy to overlook because it seems to have the usual phrases about praise and blessing. But Psalm 134 is also an unusual song: I like to think of it as a psalm written especially for the night shift. Read that first verse again:

*Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD
who minister by night in the house of the LORD.*

Night shift work isn't glamorous. It is often thankless work, the kind that goes unnoticed when it is done well, and is commented on only when it is not completed as expected. The same is true for the night shift in the house of the LORD: we don't often think about it.

What happens during the night shift in the house of the Lord? When Psalm 134 was written, those who ministered by night were the [Levites](#). I am no Old Testament scholar, so without further research, I can only speculate on what the Levites did during second and third shift. But as a pastor's wife who has a front-row seat to plenty of night-shift work in a contemporary congregation, it isn't too difficult for me to imagine what the Levites might have been up to.

Some of them, I suppose, were on call to comfort those in distress. Like today's pastors, these Levites would have been ready for a knock at the door at any hour, prepared to pray with people who were overcome by worry, fear, shock, or grief.

But I suspect that more often, the evening work of the Levites was more like the ordinary and routine night work in our churches.

Picture them: servants of the Lord after hours, picking up Kleenexes from the pews and wrappers from the floors, washing fingerprints from the windows, cutting the grass or clearing snow, locking doors. Servants of the Lord, running photocopies, making sure the glitches in the sound system are fixed, cueing recordings for the local TV station, updating the church website. Servants of the Lord, ministering by night.

When I think about the Levites who ministered by night, I think about a dedicated, reliable group who got things done and — through their skill and humility — made the work look easy. These were people who might never be in front of the congregation. Their neighbors wouldn't have thought of them as scholars or as leaders. They were people who worked with their hands. But they were, in that work, also people who worked with their hearts. And they were ministers. Psalm 134 tells us as much.

What qualified them for this work? The Levites came to it by line of birth. But those who were best at this work surely had much in common with another group of workers, described to us in Acts 6:1-4, who were chosen for hands-and-heart ministry for a different reason. Notice their qualifications:

*In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are **known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom**. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.*

Those who were chosen in Acts 6 were "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom." Their work, whether it was waiting on tables or management of a food distribution process, was not unlike those of the servants of the Lord ministering in the night: it happened without much fanfare, mostly behind the scenes. And it required each of them to have a heart "full of the Spirit" and a mind full of wisdom. As a result of their labor, we read a few verses later, "The word of God spread."

In the eyes of our culture, work that is done behind the scenes, requires manual labor, or uses technical skills is not often highly regarded. Many people would find it puzzling to think of such workers as leaders, let alone as spiritual leaders. Perhaps we should reconsider?

Think about those in Psalm 134 who labored at night, working with their hands or employing their specialized technical skills or craft knowledge: they were named "servants of the Lord" who were called to minister. And remember the essential qualifications of those called to serve in Acts 6: they were "full of the Spirit and wisdom," they were ready to get their hands dirty and get to work, but also (as in Psalm 134:2) to "lift up their hands and praise the Lord." Because of them, "the word of God spread." What more could we want in our work?