



Psalm 84 - The Joy of Worship in the Temple

To the leader: according to The Gittith. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.

Introduction

This is a psalm celebrating pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to worship at the temple. It is very much like the hymns in praise of Zion as God's special place such as Psalm 122, although this one especially focuses on the delight of going to worship there. The purpose of singing this psalm is to cultivate that delight, to open the eyes and hearts of God's people to the staggering privilege of being a welcome guest in God's own house, and to write deep into their souls the conviction that wickedness offers no reward that can even remotely compare to the joy and pleasure of God's house.

The psalm most likely comes from a time when the sanctuary was located in Zion, and when a king ruled and protected the pilgrims: he is called the anointed, and is probably from David's line, although even Saul was called 'the Lord's anointed' in 1 Samuel 24:6; however, Saul was a poor protector of the sanctuary and its personnel; refer to 1 Samuel 22:6-19. The psalm has three parts, in each of which people are pronounced 'happy' or 'blessed'.

Spurgeon said Psalm 84 was entitled "to be called The Pearl of Psalms. If the twenty-third be the most popular, the one-hundred-and-third the most joyful, the one-hundred-and-nineteenth the most deeply experimental, the fifty-first the most plaintive, this is one of the most sweet of the Psalms of Peace."

Psalm 84:1-4 - Blessed Are Those Who Dwell in God's Courts.

The song opens by describing God's house, the central sanctuary in Jerusalem. It is lovely and delightful, because it is the Lord's dwelling place; this is why the pious soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord: this is where the worshipper actually meets the living God – no wonder his heart and flesh sing for joy. Israelite worship was not 'quiet' or 'restrained': how could it be, if these beliefs are true?

The marvel is that God's house is a welcoming place; if even the sparrow finds a home there, and the swallow too, then the humble and faithful Israelite need not fear that God will turn him away.

- ¹ How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!
- ² My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

Psalm 84:1-2

How lovely is your dwelling place. The sons of Korah composed this psalm either in the days of the tabernacle, or they referred to the temple in a historic, quaint way. The affection is clear; the psalmist loved the house of God, whether it was in a tent or a permanent building. He considered it beautiful, although David recognised it was God's presence that made it so lovely: **<<One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple>>** (Psalm 27:4).

My soul longs. The psalmist's appreciation for God's house was not simply because it was beautiful. His soul longed for God's house, and even faints when denied the privilege of meeting with God among his people. This was deep feeling. Not every love is so great as to make it a longing. Not every longing is so great as to cause a person to faint. Job knew it would be so when he finally would meet the Lord: **<<and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!>>** (Job 19:26-27).

My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. The house of God was dear to and desired by the psalmist because it was where he met with God. Everything within him - his heart and flesh longed for God, and therefore loved his house. This speaks to those who are leaders in God's house today. More than offering programmes, social connections, entertainment, excitement, or self-improvement, they must make places and meetings where people meet the living God. This speaks to all who come to the house of God today. They must come without primary focus upon programmes, social connections, entertainment, excitement, or self-improvement; they must come with primary focus upon expectant meeting with the living God. The emphasis on meeting the living God prevents regarding the tabernacle or temple in the wrong way. The temple as a place could become

an ungodly escape or an idol: <<*Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?"*>> (Acts 7:48-50). The psalmist considers it here in its best sense: the place to meet with the living God. Charles Spurgeon commented, "There was no superstition in this love. He loved the house of God because he loved the God of the house. His heart and flesh cried out, not for the altar and the candlestick, but for his God."

³ Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God.

⁴ Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise. Selah

Psalm 84:3-4

Even the sparrow finds a home. Perhaps the psalmist saw birds - the sparrow and the swallow - that had made a nest, living at the house of God, in view of the altar itself. He considered those birds blessed, living in the tabernacle. Boice offered the sparrow as a picture of small significance and the swallow a picture of restlessness. The insignificant can find their place in the house of God, and the restless can find their rest there - near to God's altar. Spurgeon observed, "You and I, dear friends, will be wise if we do as this sparrow did; for she found a house for herself because she looked for it, she found it because it was there all ready for her, and she found it by appropriating it so that it became her very own. Thus may we appropriate the Lord Jesus Christ, by an act of faith, and so make him our very own!"

Happy are those who live in your house. The psalmist went from envying the birds living at the tabernacle to envying the priests who had rooms at the house of God. He felt they could live a life of constant praise, i.e. ever singing your praise. The word translated 'happy' in the NRSVA is more traditionally 'blessed'.

Those who live in your house. These are people with constant access to the sanctuary, refer to the comment made on Psalm 23:5-6; they are always singing God's praise because they can attend the services so readily. Such people are blessed, truly happy; refer to the comment made on Psalm 1:1.

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect.

Psalm 84:5-9 - Blessed Are Those Who Journey to Zion.

The next section describes those who make the journey to Zion to worship at such a sanctuary; they are blessed. Their strength is in God, to sustain them on the way; the highways are in their hearts, which probably means that they actually want to go; even though pilgrimage was obligatory: <<***Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose: at the festival of unleavened bread, at the festival of weeks, and at the festival of booths. They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed***>> (Deuteronomy 16:16), it should never become mechanical or burdensome. The location of the Valley of Baca is unknown; it seems to have been a dry place, but the faithful pilgrims make it a place of springs, which probably means that they delight in this valley as much as if it were well-watered, being so happy to be on the way. These pilgrims go from strength to strength, i.e. they keep on finding new levels of strength for the journey, until each one appears before God in Zion. Prayer for the king (the shield and anointed) closes the section; not only does he protect the pilgrims, but he is called to represent Israel before God, to model faithfulness for the whole people, and thus to keep the whole people securely serving God.

- ⁵ Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
- ⁶ As they go through the valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.
- ⁷ They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

Psalm 84:5-7

Happy are those whose strength is in you. The man who finds his strength in God is also the one whose heart are the highways to Zion. He does not rely on self or the world for strength, but considers himself a visitor, a traveller, a pilgrim in this world. His true strength and treasure is in the world to come: <<***Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and***>>

steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also>> (Matthew 6:19-21). This strength and heart of a pilgrim is displayed by the love for the house of God. There he meets with God among other fellow pilgrims and they gain strength in God together as they do. The love and longing for the house of God is not meant as an escape from the world, but as a preparation for life in the world.

As they go through the valley of Baca. The heart for God's house gave wisdom and strength for the life lived away from God's house. A difficult place (such as the Valley of Baca) is transformed into a **spring**, complete with **rain** and **pools** of water. The sense or meaning of the Valley of Baca is uncertain. Commentators usually take one of two opinions: that Baca speaks of tears and weeping or of drought and dryness. The thought of difficulty and trouble is present in either.

They go from strength to strength. With the blessedness expressed by plenty of water in an otherwise dry place, the pilgrim lives in strength and goes on to even greater strength. The rich relationship with God is a never-ending supply of strength for the journey, even in difficult seasons. On a normal journey (especially a difficult one) the normal pattern is to go from strength to weakness or fatigue. Not so with those whose strength is in God - **they go from strength to strength.**

The God of gods will be seen in Zion. The journey has a destination - Zion, the city of God. The love and longing for the house of God will bring each one to their destination, appearing before God in Zion. Spurgeon again commented, "Not merely to be in the assembly, but to appear before God was the object of each devout Israelite. Would to God it were the sincere desire of all who in these days mingle in our religious gatherings. Unless we realise the presence of God we have done nothing; the mere gathering together is worth nothing."

⁸ O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah

Psalm 84:8

O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer. This song from the Sons of Korah was more than a declaration, it was also a prayer. It was a plea for the plenty spoken of by the supply of water. It was a supplication for the strength that continues and builds: <<***Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer***>> (Psalm 4:1).

Give ear, O God of Jacob! The psalmist grounded his plea in the long history of God's dealing with his covenant people. That God who blessed and was faithful to Jacob will also be faithful to his people today. This is worthy of meditation, thus the insertion of the psalm's second **Selah.**

9 Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.

Psalm 84:9

Behold our shield, O God. Shield here is taken as a reference to a literal shield, and speaking of the material means of defence for Israel. The psalmist asked God to behold what Israel wisely did to defend themselves.

Look on the face of your anointed. Your anointed is a reference to the King of Israel, who were each specially anointed for their office. Although the psalmist had first in mind David: <<*Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favourite of the Strong One of Israel*>> (2 Samuel 23:1), or possibly Solomon, it also points toward the Messiah, the ultimate anointed One: <<*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*>> (Luke 4:18-19).

Psalm 84:10-12 - Blessed Are Those Who Trust in the Lord.

The final section describes the person who trusts in the Lord: he sincerely prefers one day in God's courts to a thousand anywhere else; and he prefers even the lowest task of service in the house of God to any gain he might have if he were to dwell in the tents of wickedness, i.e. to fashion his life in opposition to the covenant, perhaps along the familiar lines of the Gentiles. This is the person who finds God to be a sun and shield for he gives the light of life and protection, the one upon whom the Lord bestows favour and honour; such a person will not trust in these or turn them into a source of pride.

Those who walk uprightly are those whose faith is genuine, which leads to a life that aims at doing God's will; no good thing does God withhold from them because they are living in his light: <<*And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God*>> (John 3:19-21).

The main point in this psalm is to be welcomed in the temple. The faithful can enjoy other things only insofar as they express the life of the upright. Such people are blessed indeed!

- 10 For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.
- 11 For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favour and honour.
No good thing does the Lord withhold
from those who walk uprightly.
- 12 O Lord of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

Psalm 84:10-12

For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. The psalmist began with love and longing for the house of God, and now he returns to this thought. He felt that time spent in God's house was better and more valuable than time spent elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God. This was another expression of the psalmist's love and longing regarding the house of God. Living a luxurious life in the fancy tents of wickedness means nothing to him; he would rather humbly serve in God's house. The doorkeepers were the first to arrive and the last to leave!

Doorkeepers or gatekeepers in the temple were drawn from the Levites and were separated into twelve divisions to fulfil their duties according to their allotted rota: <<David assembled all the leaders of Israel and the priests and the Levites. The Levites, thirty years old and upwards, were counted, and the total was thirty-eight thousand. 'Twenty-four thousand of these', David said, 'shall have charge of the work in the house of the Lord, six thousand shall be officers and judges, four thousand gatekeepers, and four thousand shall offer praises to the Lord with the instruments that I have made for praise.' And David organised them in divisions corresponding to the sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari>> (1 Chronicles 23:2-6).

For the Lord God is a sun and shield. The sons of Korah explain the goodness and blessing that comes to those pilgrims who love and long for the house of God. They enjoy God is as the source of blessing (sun) and defence (shield). They receive his generously given favour and honour; the gracious gifts of God.

He bestows favour and honour. The connection between God's grace and his glory was later on the mind of the apostle Paul: <<*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God*>> (Romans 5:1-2).

No good thing does the Lord withhold. A promise is made to those who walk uprightly - they will receive every good thing God has for them. The nature of this promise is appropriate under the Old Covenant, where God promised direct blessing for obedience and curses for disobedience. Under the New Covenant, the believer receives God's good things on the basis of Jesus' goodness, then goes on to walk uprightly. Charles Spurgeon said, "What does the text say? It does not say, 'I will force all my children to enjoy every good thing.' No, but, 'No good thing will he withhold.' There are thousands of mercies that we do not enjoy, not because they are withheld, but because we do not take them."

Happy is everyone who trusts in you. God's greatness and goodness lead the psalmist to experience and declare the blessedness of trusting in God.