

PRAISE GOD FOR HIS PRESENCE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 84
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Psalm 84
TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Psalm 84

I. Opening Appeal

Psalm 84:1-3

For the director of music. According to
gittith.

Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm.

- ¹ How lovely is your dwelling place,
LORD Almighty!
- ² My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.
- ³ Even the sparrow has found a
home,
and the swallow a nest for
herself,
where she may have her young—
a place near your altar,
LORD Almighty, my King and my
God.

1. In older translations of the Bible, the Hebrew translated *lovely* is more commonly rendered “beloved.” The term suggests that this poem will focus on love or attachment—in this case the high degree of fondness the writer has for the Lord’s *dwelling place* (Psalms 27:4; 43:3; 132:1-8). There is no place the psalmist would rather be!

The Hebrew word translated *dwelling place* is translated “tabernacles” (tents) in older versions of the Bible. The Israelites had constructed a tabernacle to be

the portable home of the Lord’s symbolic presence.

2a. The writer’s absence from *the courts of the Lord* could be explained in one of several ways. More important to this psalm, however, is not why he wasn’t there, but the effect the absence had on the man. Such was his fervent desire that, even though he may have had no specific call to be there, he *yearns* and *even faints* to be in God’s presence nonetheless.

2b. We see parallelism here with the previous half-verse, with increasing intensity: *heart* and *flesh* are added to “soul” to indicate the man’s entire being.

The temple was understood to be the dwelling place of God’s glory. Thus to be able to be in those courts was to be as close to *the living God* as possible.

3a. We detect a note of jealousy for birds that were able to build nests within the Lord’s *home*. This was probably confined to the rafters. The *altar* itself would be far too active for a bird nest. The psalmist desired to be as intimately linked to the temple as the birds were.

3b. The psalmist described his committed relationship with his sovereign. Yes, the psalmist affirmed, he is *Lord Almighty*; but he is also *my King and my God*. The possessive pronouns suggest closeness while the titles emphasize God’s greatness. This is the great paradox of faith: the

Creator of everything, seen and unseen, desires undivided relationships with those created in his image. Jesus was the one who demonstrated how close God wants to be to us, as well as the great depths of love he was willing to go to in order to heal our relationship with him.

II. In God's Presence

Psalm 84:4-7

- ⁴ Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.**
- ⁵ Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.**
- ⁶ As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.**
- ⁷ They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.**

4. The priests and Levites were privileged to spend much of their time in the temple. Their tasks gave them ample reasons and opportunities to offer praise to the Lord. When they honored the Lord by faithfully carrying out his work, the *house* was indeed a *blessed* place to be.

Though the temple of antiquity and church buildings today are very different in function and purpose, something similar can be said about our gathering places: when ministry through faithful preaching and teaching of God's Word and serving one another in love are carried out within our walls, it is a blessed place to be. Why shouldn't a person anticipate being in the place of worship as the psalmist did? If such good things are taking place, others will be attracted to what is happening.

Our bodies are temples of God's Holy

Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Even so, we should view our church buildings as tools to be used for the Lord's grace and glory. They are places to praise the Lord in corporate worship and where people should experience his love in the midst of his people.

The meaning of the word *Selah* (not translated in this verse) is unknown. It may direct the instruments to play more loudly while the singers are silent, or it may mark a pause for reflection since it usually comes after a significant or challenging statement has been made.

5. This verse bolsters the possibility that this is a psalm of *pilgrimage*. Those who find themselves either physically on the way to the temple or at least determined to begin the journey find *strength* in the Lord.

6. There is no place in recorded Scripture called *the Valley of Baka* in Israel; elsewhere, the Hebrew word behind the translation Baka refers to a certain kind of tree. Some think the reference is to a valley near Jerusalem. Another idea is that this is a figurative description of the spiritual dryness that is relieved by arriving at the Lord's house.

7. The Hebrew word translated *strength* twice here is different from the one translated "strength" in Psalm 84:5. Thus the psalmist piles up terms for emphasis. No matter the challenges one confronts on this pilgrimage, the strength available in the Lord can never be exhausted! Paradoxically, the longer the travelers walk, the stronger they become, upheld by *God* (Isaiah 40:31). *Zion*, another name for Jerusalem (Psalms 51:18; 102:21; etc.), is the location of the temple (2 Kings 21:4).

For Christians, *Zion* represents the blessings of "a new covenant" in Christ (Hebrews 12:22-24). This blessing will culminate in New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1-5). Whatever "dry spells" are encountered along the way, the one who draws strength from the Lord will find relief.

III. Closing Appeal

Psalm 84:8-12

- ⁸ Hear my prayer, LORD God Almighty;
listen to me, God of Jacob.
- ⁹ Look on our shield, O God;
look with favor on your anointed one.
- ¹⁰ Better is one day in your courts
than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in
the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the
wicked.
- ¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and
shield;
the LORD bestows favor and
honor;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose walk is blameless.
- ¹² LORD Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in
you.

8. Recognizing the *Lord . . . Almighty* to be the same as the *God of Jacob* reminded the original reader that the Lord God had exercised his power to choose the family of Jacob to be the covenant people. The repetition of sentiment found in *hear my prayer* and *listen to me* amplifies one's desire for God to hear and take notice. All these elements taken together emphasize the full range of God's power: his attending to an entire nation is set side by side with the psalmist's conviction that God is willing and able to hear the prayer of an individual.

9. It is possible that God is the one being designated as *our shield*. But the parallelism that often characterizes Hebrew poetry suggests that the *anointed one* (the king of Israel) is the shield—the one appointed by God to lead the people in faithfulness. To *look with favor* is similar to the “listen to me” request in the previous verse.

10. The psalmist now adds elements of time quantity (duration) and position status (role) to his preference for the *courts* of the Lord's *house*. The contrast between *one day* and *a thousand* (duration) is quite sharp. To *be a doorkeeper* in the temple is the position of a low-level attendant (2 Kings 23:4). The contrast with *the tents of the wicked* is seen in Psalm 83:5-7, where high-level leadership is in view.

11a. The Hebrew noun being translated as *a sun* is not accompanied by a definite article, which, if present, would result in God's being “the sun.” Thus there is no hint of sun worship here as was common in pagan practice at the time. Rather, the idea is one of spiritual light (Psalms 13:3; 18:28).

11b. Other translations for *favor* and *honor* are “grace” and “glory.” These words together represent everything we should ultimately desire from *the Lord*.

11c. The idea of an upright *walk* is found several places in Scripture. While God does indeed bless even those who do not do so (Matthew 5:45), special favor falls on those who seek his ways. *Blameless* implies integrity or wholeness. Next to salvation itself, the ultimate *good thing* God gives to Christians while we are on earth is the gift of the Holy Spirit, conferred at baptism (Acts 2:38).

12. The final reference to being *blessed* in this psalm again acknowledges God as the *Lord Almighty*, who nonetheless is still concerned about the individual (*the one*). Anyone who *trusts in* him is blessed in the ways this psalm indicates and more.

This is heart of the psalm. While fervor for the Lord's temple and the annual pilgrimage feasts can indicate that a person's heart is yielded to God, such excitement itself is not enough. Yes, it is good to be in the house of the Lord, but that is not an end in itself. The key is trusting in the Lord of the house, living in daily fellowship with him.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

PRAISE GOD FOR HIS PRESENCE

Into the Lesson

Complete the following prompts:

A homecoming I'll always remember was . . .

When I think of "home," my first thought is . . .

Something special about my hometown is . . .

I most feel "at home" when . . .

The thought of "home" can elicit powerful feelings. But "home" can be interpreted in more ways than one, as today's lesson teaches.

Into the Word

Read Psalm 84. Using your own Bible or a handout of the printed text, complete the first three Bible-marking activities. With the help of a partner, brainstorm ideas for the fourth activity.

- 1—Put a question mark [?] beside verses you don't understand.
- 2—Put an asterisk [*] beside verses that tell *why* the psalmist longed to be in the temple courts.

3—Circle the verse you'd most like to remember in the week ahead.

4—Make a list of all the emotions expressed by the psalmist.

Into Life

Make a "does" and "does not" list for the following prompt:

List ways that the Lord determines that a person [does/does not] want his presence.

What might cause a person to switch from "does" to "does not"? From "does not" to "does"?

This lesson used the metaphor of "home" to describe closeness to God. What are situations, places, or times when you have sensed closeness to God.

How can these situations, places, or times be repeated weekly or daily?

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Remember the Lord's presence and be blessed!