

November 10, 2024

A LONGING TO BE IN GOD'S PRESENCE

Psalm 84

(3 of 9 in a series of selected Psalms)

I've mentioned before that I once mentioned to my dad I'd begun journaling, and he responded, "Just write down the good things. You may well forget those if you don't. But you'll easily be able to recall the bad things." I've found that to be true. It sure is easy to recount times you've been hurt or disappointed but recalling blessings can be much more challenging. As believers, however, we can't just succumb to the ease of remember our disappointments while ignoring or forgetting our blessings. After all, the greatest commandment we've been given—to love the Lord—is dependent upon us recognizing the great blessing that we are loved by the Lord. Gratefulness demands that we take time to consider the blessings our God has bestowed on us.

I think Psalm 84 is a psalm that guides us through that practice of remembering how we're blessed of the Lord. The psalm seems to have been written for Israelites who were making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for one of the festivals. We see that because there is so much language of anticipation about being in God's "dwelling place" (v. 1) or "house" (v. 4), which was in Jerusalem. And verses 5-7 speak of this journey one takes as he ultimately "appears before God in Zion" (v. 7), which is another way of referring to Jerusalem.

Now, in one sense, that make us feel like this psalm is not really applicable to us. There is no physical temple structure anymore. We no longer are required to make annual trips to Jerusalem or anywhere else for that matter as believers. Worship is not geographically confined to one location anymore. And so, with all of these differences between us and the psalmist, how do we relate to this psalm? The answer, I think, is in the focus of blessing that comes to God's children that the psalmist reflects on throughout. Let me show you why I say that.

Commentators almost unanimously agree that the psalm itself can be divided into four sections (vv. 1-4, 5-7, 8-9, 10-12). And if that's the case, then we can see that each section either begins or ends with a reference to being blessed. In verse 4, we read, "Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise!" The second stanza begins in verse 5 with the declaration, "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion." The psalm ends with the declaration, "O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you" (v. 12). Then, though verse 9 doesn't use the word "blessed," the idea is present as the psalmist writes, "Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed." The idea of God looking upon one is the idea of God blessing the individual. You see this in the most well-known benediction from Numbers 6:24-26 as Aaron would bless the people saying, "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." In that blessing, the first part of each of those three refrains are parallel. For the Lord to bless is to make his face to shine upon you which is to lift up

his countenance upon you. Therefore, verse 9 is a prayer for the Lord to *bless* his king (his “anointed”).

So each stanza of this psalm reflects on the blessing of God’s people or the blessing that comes to God’s people through their king. Therefore, though we might not make a journey to Jerusalem, as the psalmist did, we can recall the blessings that he reflects on in this psalm that belong to God’s people because not only do we experience these blessings, but we (on this side of Christ’s resurrection) experience them to a greater degree than the psalmist himself did. And that’s what I want to show us as we walk through the psalm this morning. First, we can say that we are blessed to get to praise the Lord.

We are blessed to get to praise the Lord

As the psalmist readies himself for his journey to Jerusalem and the temple there, he almost can’t take it. Reflecting on the temple, he declares, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God” (vv. 1-2).

It reads as if the psalmist thinks he won’t survive he’s filled with so much joyful anticipation, like a young child who can’t sleep on Christmas Eve because he can’t wait to get to the next morning. He wants to worship and praise the Lord at his temple. He pictures birds nesting in the eaves of the temple and writes, “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” (v. 3). This may suggest a hint of envy of these creatures dwelling continually in the temple, but perhaps more than that it reminds him that he won’t be turned away. If even these lowly birds are invited into the Lord’s house, he knows that he too will be received before the Lord. But if there’s a hint of envy with the birds, that is superseded by the priests and temple servants who get to dwell there and devote themselves to worship at the temple. The psalmist concludes this first stanza: “Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise!” (v. 4).

It doesn’t take much imagination to feel the psalmist’s yearning to get to the temple and the joyful delight he feels at being able to praise God. It’s as if he’s saying, “O to be one who got to be there and praise God continually!”

I don’t think it will come as a surprise to remind you that this is a blessing that is ours. The worship of God is no longer centered on a geographical reality where one has to go to the temple in Jerusalem. Remember when Jesus had the conversation with the woman at the well and she asked him to resolve this debate about where one had to worship? She said to Jesus, “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” And Jesus answered, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. . . . But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:20-24).

With those words, Jesus was confirming that worship of God is not limited to some geographical location. Instead of going to the altar at the temple in Jerusalem and offering sacrifices, Paul tells us to “present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is [our] spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1).

What this means is that the psalmist was reasonable to declare how blessed the priests and temple servants were to be at the place where God manifested his presence among his people. They got to be in the Lord’s presence and worship him continually, but now that reality has spread to all of the Lord’s people. We’re all priests, who can all come to our Father through Jesus and worship him. That is an enormous blessing.

And it’s nothing to take for granted. There’s a world full of people whose hearts are hardened and minds darkened so that they do not praise the Lord as they ought. Now, we might respond, “Yes, but isn’t that through their hardened rebellion to the Lord?” Indeed it is. But what makes us different? Isn’t it merely that the Lord has graciously opened our eyes to see the glory of God in the face of Christ? This is nothing about which to brag but to thank God for and worship him. We have the enormous blessing of getting to praise the Lord. Second, we are blessed with God’s preserving strength.

We are blessed with God’s preserving strength

In verses 5-7, the psalmist begins to dwell on the journey to Jerusalem. The actual trip could be quite trying. You might find yourself going over rugged terrain and facing desert-like conditions. It seems that this is what he’s referencing when he refers to the “Valley of Baca” in verse 6. Dictionaries and commentators suggest that this is probably a reference to balsam trees which would grow in a “sandy . . . arid . . . dry valley.”¹ In other words, the psalmist is imagining a very unpleasant place to travel.

But if you think that he’s, therefore, suggesting that the trip would be overwhelming, going through such an uninviting place, you couldn’t be more wrong. Notice what he says happens. He writes, “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the Valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion” (vv. 5-7).

Now, what I don’t know is if the psalmist is being literal here. If so, he’s saying that though they travel through this valley that should be difficult, dry, and troubling, the Lord will bring early rains so that when they get there, they’ll see pools of water and will be strengthened by the Lord’s grace for their continued journey so that they’ll arrive at Jerusalem.

¹ Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 754. See also, *BDB*, 113.

However, he may just be saying that though the journey to Jerusalem will require treading through such dry and difficult places, the Lord will strengthen them *as if* he'd sent rains to provide puddles of water around them so that they'll arrive at Jerusalem. But either way, the point is the same. They are able to draw strength from the Lord provision for this journey in which they set out to worship the Lord.

Again, for us, bringing this truth into the new covenant, on this side of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension, we can attest to this same reality, can't we? We noted last week that the Lord told Paul that he wouldn't remove the thorn from his flesh, but he would give him grace to sustain him. Such declarations are continually made to us as believers. Whether it is the reminder of Philippians 2:13 that God is at work within us to will and work for his good pleasure or Paul's declaration in 1 Cor 1:8 that the Lord will "sustain [us] to the end" or a myriad of others.

I won't rehearse them all now, but this is how the Lord works. He does not always deliver us from walking through difficulty. In fact, he has promised us trials and tribulation. But he is with us and has promised to sustain us. He will give us strength so that we might grow stronger, even as we walk through the "Valley of Baca" or the valley of the shadow of death. Blessed are those who find their strength in the Lord because the Lord gives us sustaining and preserving strength. Third, we're reminded that we've been blessed with a righteous king.

We are blessed with a righteous king

As the psalmist arrives in Jerusalem, his mind is drawn to the king. After all, that's where David's son would have resided. And so he prays for the king, saying in verses 8-9, "O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed!"

We know that this is a prayer for the king because the psalmist refers to the one for whom he is praying as the Lord's "anointed," a term common for the king in the Old Testament. Also, the term "shield" is again a reference to the king, denoting the reality that it is the king who defends the nation. Now, why would the psalmist utter this prayer for the king? Well, there are a few reasons.

We've already established that the king would defend the nation. When we think of king David, for example, a number of elements in his life come to mind, but one aspect we shouldn't overlook is the fact that he was a mighty and conquering king. He conquered his enemies and defended his people again and again, even when the attack came from his own son. Likewise, Solomon was spoken of as having rest on every side, with no adversary against him early in his reign (1 Kings 5:4), a reminder of his protection of the people. And we could go on, noting how Hezekiah defended his people in Isaiah 37 by turning to the Lord in prayer so that the Lord struck down 185,000 Assyrians overnight when they threatened Judah under his reign.

But another reason why any Israelite would want to pray for the Lord's blessing upon his king was because the king went, so went the people. The king was their representative before God. As he

prospered, they prospered. As he was wicked and invited judgment, they suffered. This is why the prophets denounce the evil kings as evil shepherds, noting that the people are scattered like sheep because their wicked shepherds invited judgment on the nation (see, for example, Ezekiel 34:1-6). We even see this with David as he commits an evil act in numbering the people and the result is that 70,000 Israelites died. Therefore, it makes all the sense in the world that as an Israelite arrived in Jerusalem and considered his king, he would ask the Lord to show blessing and favor to the king. That's precisely what he's praying when he asks the Lord to look upon the face of his anointed, which we've already established. Drawing all of this together, the average Israelite knew that as God blessed his king, so God blessed his people.

Now, I know we just came off of an election, but the application for those of us in the new covenant isn't to go from Israel and their king to America and our president. The connection, rather, is with God's people and our king, Jesus. You see, the relationship between God's king and God's people has not ended. But the glorious reality is that we're no longer represented by the kings that fill the pages of 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings. Even the best of them was still marred by great sin. Rather, we're represented by God's perfectly righteous king, Jesus. We are united with him by faith so that what is true of him becomes true of us as well.

This is the essence of the gospel. The good news of the gospel isn't that we're able to do enough good and avoid enough bad to stand before God and be judged as righteous. The reality is that we can't do enough good or avoid enough bad because God demands perfect righteousness. But the good news of the gospel is that we have a king who has been righteous for us. And as we place our faith in Christ for our salvation, we can know that his payment for sins counts for us, his perfectly righteous life counts for us, his justifying resurrection counts for us, and we are God's sons in him. Do you see how this works? We don't contribute anything to our righteous standing before God. We simply place our faith in his righteous Son (who, as our king, represents us before God), and everything he is and receives counts for us. That is the greatest blessing of all, that we have a perfectly righteous king. But there is one more note, namely, that we are blessed with a God who withholds no good thing from us as we trust in him.

We are blessed with a God who withholds no good thing from us as we trust in him

In verses 10-12, it's as if the psalmist's joy at arriving at the temple in Jerusalem reaches a crescendo. He first notes that to be the of the lowliest of positions for the smallest of time in God's temple is immensely superior to dwelling with the wicked days on end, saying, "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 dwell in the tents of wickedness." But then he tells us why this is the case in verses 11-12, writing, "For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!"

The reason you'd rather be one of God's children gathered in his temple for one day rather than dwelling in wickedness is because the Lord's people are immensely blessed. Whereas the wicked will face God's merciless wrath in judgment, the righteous get to live their whole lives knowing

that they are approved of by God. They know that he gives life to us like the sun does the earth and protects us from everlasting harm as our shield. His favor is on us because of our union with Christ. And he withholds no good thing from us.

Now, it's this last declaration that might cause us to hesitate a bit. Do we really think that's true? I mean, we could dismiss it perhaps by saying this was a truth for those under the old covenant, and with the arrival of the new covenant in Christ, such a blessing is diminished. But that doesn't follow. The new covenant brings greater blessings, not fewer, including the fact that all of those who are members of this covenant have new hearts and forgiveness of sins. But how can we say this is true? Don't we feel like God withholds good from us? After all, we have some who battle health issues every day, others who suffer with infertility, others who desperately want a spouse and don't have one, and on and on. How do we answer this?

Well, first, let's establish that very similar promises come to us in the pages of the New Testament as well. For example, Paul writes in Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" This is clearly an argument from the greater to the lesser. If the Lord did the most significant thing of giving his Son to die for us, how do we think he'll withhold all things we need? But perhaps some would answer, "Yes, but he means just in the resurrection." In other words, we might push back on this and say, "Yes, we'll get all things good for us, but we'll only get them when Jesus returns and we are raised. That's what Paul is talking about in Romans 8:32." Well, minimally he means that, but I think this also applies to this life.

After all, only a few verses earlier Paul affirmed that "for those who love God all things work together for good" (Rom 8:28). In other words, everything that comes to us in our lives—whether they cause us to rejoice or mourn—are for our good and used for our good. We may receive a thorn in the flesh, but this isn't the Lord withholding a better life where one has no thorn. It is so that we might experience God's power demonstrated in our weakness. Now, apply that across the board, and as God's children we can say that our Lord gives us all we need to be made like his Son and to best glorify him. In that, he withholds no good thing from us. And so we trust him and live with grateful hearts.

Psalm 84 is a picture of one of God's children overwhelmed at the blessings that are his as he is blessed to worship the Lord, blessed to be strengthened by the Lord, blessed to be represented by his righteous king, and blessed to trust the Lord, knowing that his God withholds no good thing from him. And I promise you, our situation is better than his. Even the lowliest of God's people on this side of the resurrection are more greatly blessed because we have read and know of Christ's life, death, and resurrection for us. We know our savior's name is Jesus. We have the Holy Spirit indwelling us. We aren't just represented by a good king but a perfect one. And so we should rejoice and take great delight in the blessings that are ours as God's children through our union with Jesus Christ. Let us rejoice and give thanks for that now as we come to the table. Amen.