

I Love Your Presence, Lord

Psalm 84

In a classic cartoon from *Leadership Magazine*, the preacher is making a special presentation: “We have a special gift for a lady that hasn’t missed a service in over forty-five years. Eleanor Smith! Where is Eleanor sitting? Eleanor? Eleanor ...”

Do you love the house of God? Do you yearn for those times when you can gather together with His people for the purpose of entering as one community into His presence? Is there somewhere you would rather be right now? Psalm 84 was penned by a man who clearly loved God’s presence. “How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty!” We don’t know the man’s name, but we can see what gave him great joy, and that was to be in the presence of the Lord.

Psalm 84 is attributed to the “*Sons of Korah*”. These particular Levites were gatekeepers at the temple. Their duties were largely custodial, but they also were involved with the temple music. We do not know the precise background of Psalm 84, but the text provides some subtle hints about the times. It was written sometime before the exile because there is a temple, or at least, a tent of meeting, and there seems to be a king. But, something also seems to be going on in the life of the nation that has interrupted the joyful normalcy of worship and temple life.

The psalmist is yearning for the opportunity to serve at the temple. It may simply be that it is not yet his turn. There were too many Korahites for them to all be on duty at one time. It is more likely, however, given the psalmist’s prayer for God’s favor upon His “anointed one” (verse 9), that some “un-anointed” usurper was creating conflict for the nation, specifically, the king. Some experts suggest that this psalm was written during the time that Absalom, David’s son, was trying to wrestle the throne from his father. Others suggest that this psalm was written much later, in the days of Hezekiah, when Sennacherib of Assyria was threatening to destroy Judah.

Whatever the historical context, it is clear that this is one Levite who loves his job. He equates the temple of God with the presence of God, and that presence means more to him than anything. By the blood of Christ, Christians now have complete and unfettered access to the very presence of God. Can you get your head around that? Do you fully appreciate the importance of that truth? When two or more of us gather in Jesus’ Name, He has promised that He is here. In the hectic scramble to get a family out the door on Sunday morning, do you prepare yourself for that awesome reality? The notion that a man can abide in the presence of God - that is no trivial thing.

I. The Sweetness of *JEHOVAH*’s Presence (1-4)

- ¹How lovely is your dwelling place,
 O LORD Almighty!
- ²My soul yearns, even faints,
 for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
 for the living God.
- ³Even the sparrow has found a home,
 and the swallow a nest for herself,
 where she may have her young –
a place near your altar,
 O LORD Almighty, my King and my God.
- ⁴Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
 they are ever praising you. *Selah*

A. A Levite Ponders His Good Fortune

The Israelites thought of the temple in Jerusalem as the abode of God in a very real sense. Once a year, the high priest would enter into the Most Holy Place in the very center of the temple to meet with God and to make intercession for the sins of the people. Our Levite does not long to be a part of another tribe so that he could experience more of life. Rather, he thought to himself, “What a gig! I get to dwell in the house of my God. How lovely is your dwelling place!”

What in fact was it that was so pleasant about the presence of God to this Levite? After all, sinners typically found the presence of the Holy One of Israel quite unsettling. But at the temple, sin was atoned for, so praise and peace were the norm. The temple was, after all, the house of *JEHOVAH Sabaoth* or, the LORD of Hosts. This name is rendered “LORD Almighty” in verse 1. This particular name represents the sovereignty of *JEHOVAH* over every power in heaven and on earth. He is the Great King of all creation, but He is also the Friend and Father of Israel.

It is a small wonder that a boy from the tribe of Levi would find great pleasure in knowing that he abides in the presence of *JEHOVAH Sabaoth*. No matter how big and scary the enemy Israel faced, the God of the armies of Heaven was bigger. This God can secure the fortunes of His people because He stands above everything that stands opposed to them. He is the only God Who can take our adversity and turn it into joy. He is the only God Who can turn oppression by our enemies into freedom and Who can breathe eternal life into death. The psalmist describes the depth of His desire to be in *JEHOVAH*'s presence, a yearning as physical as it is spiritual. “My soul yearns, even faints ... my heart and my flesh cry out.” In a world of numerous idols and lifeless deities, the psalmist hungers for the “living God”. How can His presence be anything but lovely?

He even envies the birds that build their nests in the eaves of the temple's structures. Why should the birds be so blessed as to merit a home in God's house when taking turns with other Levites interrupts this man's service? God's presence is the sole desire of his heart and the theme of his song. Whether it is storing ancient scrolls, manning the gates or tidying up the grounds, nothing is better than being where God is. In fact, that is how he sums up the first stanza of his song: “Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you” (verse 4). Then, he signals the end of the stanza with *Selah*, which means that this is a place for a meditative pause. There is no higher blessedness than the presence of God, and he invites the worshipper to chew on that for a moment before moving on

B. The Psalmist Challenges Us to Examine Our True Appetite for God

Two grandparents took their 5-year-old grandson to church. Grandma took her place with the choir. Grandpa and the child sat in the congregation. During the service, Grandma motioned several times to the little boy to poke Grandpa and keep him awake, but there was no response from him. After church, she asked him why he did not do what she had asked, especially since she had given him 50 cents. He answered, “Grandpa gave me a dollar to let him sleep.”

What is your appetite for worship? Commenting on this very psalm, Charles Spurgeon wrote:

“Those are sorry saints who see nothing amiable in the services of the Lord's house.”

Has this Levite painted only an idealistic picture of how a Christian should view worship, but one that smacks of unreal to you? If the worship of God is not your life's greatest passion, then at least concede that some unfortunate distraction exists in your life. God desires to be your greatest joy, but something is in the way. What do you possess that have you not surrendered to Him? Who or what do you trust more than you trust Him? Identify it. Forsake it. Allow God to be your joy.

II. The Strength of *JEHOVAH*'s Presence (5-8)

- ⁵Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
 who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.
- ⁶As they pass through the Valley of Baca,
 they make it a place of springs;
 the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
- ⁷They go from strength to strength,
 till each appears before God in Zion.
- ⁸Hear my prayer, O LORD God Almighty;
 listen to me, O God of Jacob. *Selah*

A. The Levite Turns His Thoughts to His Fellow Israelites

Only one of Israel's twelve tribes had the privilege of being sanctified to God for the service of the tabernacle and later, the temple. Most Israelites, especially those who did not live in Jerusalem, only visited the temple at appointed seasons such as during the three great feasts. Large groups would travel together to Jerusalem for these feasts. This is what the psalmist is referencing when he speaks of those "who have set their hearts on pilgrimage" (verse 5).

Great excitement attended each of these festivals as thousands poured into Jerusalem from all over Israel. But, the psalmist is not talking about *every* pilgrim. A crowd has a life of its own. Enthusiasm is contagious. Holidays are fun. We can relate to how easily the meanings behind special days can get lost in the clutter of parties, gift exchanges and Easter eggs. The psalmist had in mind those who were observing these great days from the heart, those who refused to let the sacred meanings behind the festivals get lost. They "have set their hearts on pilgrimage."

We do not know of an actual *Valley of Baca* through which pilgrims from any of the four directions had to pass in order to get to Jerusalem. This is most likely a metaphorical valley. *Baca* is from a word that means "weeping". What the psalmist may have in mind is that the worship of God and the meanings behind the great festivals of Israel were enough to restore joy to even the most troubled Israelite. This metaphorical wilderness, though bleak and barren, would begin to blossom as Jerusalem drew near, awakening thoughts of God's goodness.

The psalmist may have been thinking, "Let those troubled pilgrims look forward to the worship of the God of the Feast of Passover, Who acted in power to rescue His nation from slavery in Egypt. Let the downhearted come to Jerusalem and exalt the God of the Feast of Pentecost, Who gave His Law to His people so that they might know the difference between that way of life that leads to curses and that way which leads to blessings. And, let those weary pilgrims come in the autumn for the Feast of Tents to celebrate *JEHOVAH*, who sustained their ancestors through forty years in the desert and Who continues to provide for His people by giving them a harvest at the right time. The tedium of the journey gives way to thoughts of a good and generous God.

When we are on a long journey, we get wearier the farther we travel. We look forward to the end of the day when we can rest. But, on certain occasions, there is some great joy at the end of that journey. Perhaps, you will see a loved one you have not seen in years and you will be able to sit up and visit because exhaustion has given way to a second wind. It is that kind of a second wind that the psalmist has in mind when he says in verse 7, "They go from strength to strength, until each one appears before God in Zion." The joy of the anticipation of meeting God is greater than the weariness of the journey. The pace picks up rather than slows down as we draw nearer.

B. The Psalmist Challenges Us to Examine Our True Hope in God

The worship gurus in this age tell us how easily distracted people are when they come to church, so they counsel us to be alert to everything – lights, traffic, temperature, clutter, noise, humor, music – spectators in worship are very sophisticated these days. But, I suspect our Levite would have a different theory as to why so many people feel they miss meeting with God when they come to church. It is probably not because of all those trappings and considerations I mentioned.

This delight of worship depicted in this psalm is not reserved for the half-hearted, but only for those who fully engage themselves. Neither public prayer, corporate praise nor the preaching of the Word will do much to minister to a man who has left his heart at home. What do you expect when you draw near to God in worship? Are you hopeful that He will raise your spirits and fill your life with joy where previously there was only fear and agitation? Is it possible that you don't emerge from God's house blessed because you did not come trusting Him for a blessing?

Sometimes, we fall into a trap of serving God, even worshipping Him out of a sense of duty, habit or respectability, and we simply forget how much He actually loves us. We forget that it is His desire to teach us, heal us, correct us and build us up, so, we may not come to the house of God looking for such things. We forget that engaging ourselves in worship may demand more than shoe-horning the last kid into the car and driving in from wherever. There is such a thing as mindfully “drawing near to God” in expectation of an encounter and of a blessing. This is what the ancient pilgrims did. They did not simply “load up” the minivan and head out for Jerusalem.

III. The Safety of *JEHOVAH*'s Presence (9-12)

⁹Look upon our shield, O God;
look with favor on your anointed one.

¹⁰Better 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.

¹¹For 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.

¹²O LORD Almighty,
blessed is the man who trusts in you.

A. The Levite Cries Out for a Restored Normalcy to His Praise

Again, we do not know what precise national threat loomed in the background as this Levite wrote his song. Whatever it was, he knew that for worship to once again be all it should be—undistracted, joyful magnificent—rebellion must end, and God must rule His people. The psalmist prayed for God to show favor to his anointed king whether that was David, Hezekiah or someone else. Communion with God is broken anytime human pride seeks to usurp the rule of God. The most common un-anointed usurper with whom a modern worshipper must contend is his own prideful nature. Whoever this ancient usurper was, he may have promised favors in exchange for loyalty, but the psalmist wanted nothing but for God to rule the lives of his people.

A day in the courts of God is preferable to a thousand elsewhere. What is more, the psalmist announces that he would rather be a small duck in God's pond than the head duck in any other pond. "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked." There may be riches and power to be gained by abandoning the presence of God, but it would all prove to be great loss. Jesus put it in a similarly simple way when he asked the pointed question, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36, 37).

B. The Psalmist Challenges Us to Examine Our Own Dependence on God

No worldly prize can justify a man's estrangement from God. The psalmist refers to God as both "a sun and shield." As a light, God directs our paths. As a shield, He keeps us safe. This world is filled with temptations that distract us away from our sense of deep need for God. There are a million other things in this world that we can choose to trust, but wherever God is present is better than any other place. "O LORD Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you."

Because the presence of God was not a particularly precious thing to most of His people, because the tents of the wicked were so appealing, *JEHOVAH* eventually would give His people over to foreign captors. When a remnant of Jews returned to Jerusalem after seventy years in Babylonian exile, they were pretty well purged of any tendencies to bow to foreign gods and silly idols. But the mere fact that they no longer bowed to manmade idols was not enough to guarantee that they had learned to worship *JEHOVAH*, the one true God with the fullness of their whole hearts.

Toward the end of the Old Testament era, certain orthodox religious leaders were simply going through the motions of worshipping the Lord. In fact, some even came right out and said in regard to the rituals of worship, "What a burden!" (Malachi 1:13). Can you imagine that? For these priests, the holy service of God had lost its "pop". It had become a bore, a labor of tedium rather than of love, a yoke around their necks. Is there is any chance you relate all too well?

What kind of a worshipper are you, friend? Is there a place in you that thinks, "What a burden!" or a nature that sings, "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty!" My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God." The psalmist who penned Psalm 84 is the kind of worshipper God desires for all of us to be. He understood the presence of God and he loved it more than anything.

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