

# Psalm 84: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Psalm 84 To the choirmaster, according to the Gittith, a psalm of the sons of Korah. 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. 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, Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

As they go through the valley of Baker, 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.

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. For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

[ 1 : 0 5 ] I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. For the Lord God is a sun and shield. The Lord bestows favour and honour.

No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you. Although it contains elements of a number of genres, Psalm 84 is principally a psalm of pilgrimage, beginning with the pilgrim longing for the house of the Lord as they make their way up to Jerusalem.

William Brown writes, While drawing its imagery from nature and theophany, this pilgrimage song integrates both movement and residence. Those who set their face towards Zion to dwell in its courts are identified with those who walk uprightly.

Indeed, the pilgrimage to Zion is a journey of the heart, within which is set the sanctuary root. As they go from strength to strength, sustained along the way by the fructified land, they reach their final destination.

The journey to Zion is rooted in both the will and emotive depths of one's being. The metaphor of the pathway effectively directs desire, conjoins body and soul, and prepares the heart to enter God's domain.

[ 2 : 1 9 ] The temple, the place of God's dwelling, is the site of refuge for the pilgrimage, to which he makes his way. Faith here is a movement toward the place of God's presence. Given the references to rain in verse 6, it might be the Feast of Tabernacles that is in view here, as Daniel Estes suggests.

Psalm 84 is also, as James Mays observes, a psalm with three beatitudes in it. Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

And then, O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you. Mays writes, Pilgrimage to God's place is a ritual of entry into God's ordering of reality and the conditions of human life.

Although its dominant theme is one of pilgrimage, it also contains intercession for the king and an expression of the delight of being in the presence of God. The psalm opens on a note of love and longing, as if it were a romantic poem.

Yet it is not for some human beloved that the psalmist yearns, but for the courts of the Lord, the place where the Lord's presence is especially to be enjoyed and his face to be sought. Conrad Schaeffer writes, The temple is God's dwelling and a human refuge, surveyed with a shifting scope.

[ 3 : 51 ] Dwelling place, courts of the Lord, birds nesting, your altars, those who live in God's house, soul, heart and flesh, representing the spiritual, intellectual and physical aspects, in a word the whole person, desires life from the living God, which the physical condition of finding a home within the temple signifies.

The little birds also project the spiritual condition. The psalmist longing, fainting and singing imitate the birds, dipping, soaring and nesting in the temple precincts.

Elsewhere in the psalms, the soul is compared to an animal with its vulnerability, dependence, fear and longing. In Psalm 42 verse 1, for instance, the psalmist compares his soul to a deer panting for water.

Here the birds, in their frailty and their mobility, are where he finds a resonant comparison. The psalmist wishes he could be like one of these birds, who can make their home in the temple.

Like a wandering bird, the psalmist is looking for a safe nesting place of his own. The temple is the nest that he so deeply desires, a place where he can take shelter under God's wings.

[ 5 : 00 ] His heart thrilling at the thought of being like the joyful sparrow or swallow singing in the temple precincts, the psalmist feels both the ache and the release of love. While returning to God's house, the psalmist is like the bird in flight, seeking the place where it can find rest and safety.

An insistent word throughout this opening is your. Your dwelling place, your altars, your house, your praise. The longing of the psalmist is not just for a beautiful place, a place where he feels peace, perhaps, but for the Lord's place, the place where he can more fully know communion with and refuge in the God that he longs for.

Verses 5 to 7 are difficult to translate, and while their general sense seems to be discernible, there are specific words and phrases that are much less clear. The pilgrims find strength from the Lord.

The path towards the place of their longing energises and impels them as they near their yearned-for destination. The psalmist, who has already seen himself in the birds, now sees a harmony of creation with the travellers, as if the travellers brought the reviving seasonal rains with them as they passed through the dry valleys.

Similar imagery of the restored way through the wilderness can be found in the book of Isaiah, in chapter 35, verses 6 to 7. For waters break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

[ 6 : 21 ] The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water. In the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. In chapter 41, verse 18, I will open rivers on the bare heights and fountains in the midst of the valleys.

I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. As they walk this path, they go from strength to strength. Some commentators and translations see this as a movement past fortifications, from fortification to fortification.

Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted. But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary.

[ 7:36 ]     The psalm began with longing for God's house, and it ends with expressions of delight in God's house. The Lord's temple is a place so rich with blessing that a single day within it outweighs years without.

The association of the Lord with the sun is similar to his association with the rock. It's a very fundamental metaphor within scripture. Brown writes, In addition to being a sun, God is like a shield.

A question to consider. Where else do we see the imagery of birds being used in the scripture? How might it help us imaginatively to fill out the comparisons that the psalmist invites here?

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