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HOW BLESSED!

Psalm 84

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June 7, 2009

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June 7, 2009
Psalms 2008-09, Lesson 22

How Blessed! Psalm 84

One of Satan's most insidious lies is that the Christian life is void of pleasure, whereas pursuing sin brings real satisfaction. For example, the cynical H. L. Mencken said, "Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy" (cited by Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints* [Academie/Zondervan], p. 1). Another cynic said that Puritanism "damages the human soul, renders it hard and gloomy, deprives it of sunshine and happiness" (Langdon Mitchell, *ibid.*).

Leland Ryken, who cites these quotes, goes on to show how false they are. For example, Puritan Thomas Gataker "wrote that it is the purpose of Satan to persuade us that 'in the kingdom of God there is nothing but sighing and groaning and fasting and prayer,' whereas the truth is that 'in his house there is marrying and giving in marriage, ... feasting and rejoicing'" (*ibid.*, p. 2). "William Tyn-dale described the Christian gospel as 'good, merry, glad and joyful tidings, that maketh a man's heart glad, and maketh him sing, and dance, and leap for joy'" (*ibid.*, pp. 2-3).

But we don't need the citations of the Puritans to refute Satan's lies. The Bible itself repeatedly proclaims the soul-satisfying joy of knowing God. As we saw, David exults (Ps. 16:11), "In Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever." The list could go on for pages, but here are a few more:

Psalm 34:8: "O taste and see that the Lord is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!"

Psalm 36:7-8: "How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; and You give them to drink of the river of Your delights."

Psalm 63:3-5: "Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips will praise You. So I will bless You as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth offers praises with joyful lips."

Those verses do not sound like a deprived soul who was enduring a life devoid of pleasure! Over and over the Psalms tell us how blessed we are if we follow the Lord. And Psalm 84 is another example. It begins by exclaiming, "How lovely are Your dwelling places, O Lord of hosts!" Then, three times the psalmist exclaims, "How blessed!" In verse 4, "How blessed are those who dwell in Your house! They are ever praising You." Verse 5: "How blessed is the man whose strength is in You...." And, verse 12, "O Lord of hosts, how blessed is the man who trusts in You!" These repeated exclamations teach us that...

The pleasures that God gives to satisfy our souls should fuel our desire to be in His presence.

In other words, God motivates us to seek Him with the pleasures and satisfaction of being in His presence. And those pleasures are not all delayed until we arrive in heaven. They begin now. As Jesus proclaimed with reference to His sheep (John 10:10b), "I came that they may have life; and have it more abundantly."

We can't be sure about the author of Psalm 84 or the historical circumstances in which he wrote it. Some respected commentators (Calvin & Spurgeon) think that David wrote it. I do not agree. The picture of the swallows building their nests in God's house would point toward Solomon's temple rather than the tabernacle. Swallows build their nests under the eaves of permanent buildings, but not on tents. So it was written after David's time.

Also, although some (e.g., James Boice) disagree, most think that the psalmist was not able to be at the temple, although he wanted to be there. Derek Kidner (*Psalms 73-150* [IVP], p. 302) writes, "Longing is written all over this psalm. This eager and homesick man is one of the Korahite temple singers, and the mood of the psalm is not unlike that of Psalms 42 and 43, which are a product of the same group."

J. J. S. Perowne *The Book of Psalms* [Zondervan], 2:115) suggests that the parallels between those psalms and this one point to the same author. For example, in 84:2, the psalmist says, "My soul longed for and even yearned for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy [or, cry out] to the living God." In 42:1, 2 we read a similar cry, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so

my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?" Psalms 84:2 and 42:2 are the only times in the Psalms that God is referred to as "the living God." In 84:4, the psalmist says of those who dwell in God's house, "they are ever praising You." In 42:5 he cries, "for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence." In 84:7, he mentions concerning these pilgrims, "Every one of them appears before God in Zion." In 42:2 he asks, "when shall I come and appear before God?" In 84:1, he mentions God's dwelling places. In 43:3, he asks God to send out His light and truth so that they will lead him "to Your dwelling places."

There are a few differences between Psalms 42-43 and Psalm 84. In the earlier psalms, the psalmist was being taunted by his enemies, whereas in Psalm 84 there is no mention of this. In the earlier psalms, the author was battling depression, whereas here his mood seems to have changed to joy. But in both the earlier psalms and in Psalm 84, the author strongly wants to be at God's temple, and more, to be in the presence of the living God Himself.

Let's look at the three blessings, which show us the pleasures that God uses to fuel our desire to be in His presence:

1. The pleasure of being in God's house should fuel our desire to be in His presence (84:1-4).

The plural, "dwelling places," may refer to the various parts of the temple where God manifested Himself, or it may just be a poetic form (the plural is also in Ps. 43:3 & 46:4). "How lovely" is an expression of love poetry (Kidner, p. 303), expressing the attractiveness of God's house. "O Lord of hosts" (see also 84:3, 8, 12) designates God as the Sovereign over all the spiritual forces in the universe, who can easily defend His people.

Verse 2 indicates that the psalmist longs to be at the temple, but is not able to be there. In the context, the verb translated "sing for joy" might better be rendered, "cry out" (Kidner, *ibid.*). The psalmist's total being (soul, heart, and flesh) are crying out to the living God that he might join the worshipers at the temple.

In verse 3, he recalls being in the temple and seeing the swallows flitting around the courtyard. They made their nests high on the temple buildings. The psalmist now envies these little birds,

because they are at the temple, but he is not. Although they were insignificant creatures who could not rationally worship God, they had found the right place for their nests, there in the temple. Spurgeon preached an entire sermon on verse 3 (“The Sparrow and the Swallow,” *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 53:253-264), developing the idea that just as these little birds found homes for themselves and nests for their young, so Christians find the same in Christ and His church.

After again addressing God as the Lord of hosts (84:3), the psalmist reflects his personal relationship with this Sovereign, “my King and my God.” Although God is the awesome power who commands all the powerful angels of heaven, He is also our personal King and God through Jesus Christ. Then the psalmist exclaims, “How blessed are those who dwell in Your house! They are ever praising You.” Perowne (p. 119, italics his) comments, “*The blessedness of God’s house is that there men praise Him. This it was that made that house so precious to the Psalmist. And what Christian man can climb higher than this—to find in the praise of God the greatest joy of his life?*”

The Bible reveals that we may enjoy God’s presence individually or corporately, in any location. It may be in a church building or it may be at a beautiful outdoor scene. We may be alone or we may be with a stadium full of believers. As New Testament believers, we need to be clear that there are no longer any sacred buildings. God doesn’t dwell in cathedrals, but rather in His people, who are now His temple, both individually and corporately (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; Eph. 2:21-22). But the psalmist’s point here is that he longed to gather corporately with God’s people so that he could praise God with them and experience God’s presence together.

Do you share his longing? Do you look forward to gathering with the saints in worship, with the desire to be in God’s presence? I think that we tend to be too laid back about gathering with the church. Do you come really looking for God to show up? We should come eagerly with the prayer that we might encounter the living God in the midst of His people, His temple!

2. The pleasure of experiencing God’s strength in our weakness should fuel our desire to overcome hindrances to get to God’s house (84:5-9).

Instead of putting his “how blessed” at the end of the section (as in 84:4, 12), the psalmist leads with it (84:5-7): “How blessed is the man whose strength is in You, in whose heart are the highways to Zion! Passing through the valley of Baca they make it a spring; the early rain also covers it with blessings. They go from strength to strength, every one of them appears before God in Zion.” These verses make the point that...

- A. God gives us His strength in our weakness so that we can overcome hindrances to worship Him in His house.

The psalmist pictures a band of pilgrims making their way towards the temple through difficult terrain. The last phrase of verse 5 is difficult (literally, “in whose heart are the ways”), but in the context it seems to mean that these pilgrims have such a desire to be at God’s temple that they make the rough desert paths into highways (see Isa. 35:8). They pass through the valley of Baca, which probably means, “tears.” It is symbolic for a place of affliction or difficulty. But their anticipated joy at being at the temple turns this desert valley into a place of springs. God sends rain to provide for them as they travel. As a result, they go from strength to strength (God’s strength, not their own), arriving safely to appear before God in Zion. Meeting with God in the company of His people is the joyous goal.

Regarding the blessing of having God as our strength, John Calvin observes (*Calvin’s Commentaries* [Baker], p. 358), “To lean with the whole heart upon God, is to attain to no ordinary degree of advancement: and this cannot be attained by any man, unless all his pride is laid prostrate in the dust, and his heart is truly humbled.” In other words, we won’t know God’s strength until we see our own weakness. As long as we proudly think that we can live the Christian life in our own power, we will not know God’s power.

Calvin (pp. 359-362) goes on to apply these verses as a rebuke to those who are too lazy to inconvenience themselves to go to church. In his day, people either had to walk or ride a horse to get to church, often in stormy weather. He might be a bit more forceful in rebuking those today who can drive to church in comfortable cars! I was touched when I was in Nepal and Barney asked the men how long it had taken them to come to the meetings. Some of them had walked for hours and then ridden on their crowded bus-

ses for more hours to get there! They sat on the hard floor for hours to listen to the teaching of God's Word. And yet we often skip church because we don't want to be inconvenienced to get out of bed and drive across town to sit in our comfortable chairs!

Verses 8 & 9 seem to be a parenthesis in the flow of the psalm: "O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Behold our shield, O God, and look upon the face of Your anointed." But they may fit into the context by showing that...

B. Prayer is the means of laying hold of God's strength in our weakness.

There seems to be some sort of national crisis behind this psalm (Willem VanGemeren, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 5:545). Some think that the psalmist was the king, praying here for himself. But he just as well could have been a member of the Korahites, unable to get to the temple because of some national crisis. Perhaps a foreign army was threatening the land, so he couldn't travel. So he cries out to the Lord God of hosts, the God of Jacob, to behold their shield and to look upon the face of His anointed. The *shield* and the *anointed* both refer to the king (see Ps. 89:18). The psalmist and his fellow pilgrims needed the king's protection in order to make their journey to the temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus Christ is God's supreme Anointed One (*Christ* means *anointed one*). He is our Shield and King, through whom we have access to the God of Jacob. Jacob was a weak, undeserving man who wrestled with God and prevailed. Thus the God of Jacob is the God of weak and undeserving people who put their trust in Him. His house (now, His people) should be a house of prayer (Matt. 21:13), where we appropriate His strength for our weakness.

Thus the pleasure of being in God's house should fuel our desire to be in His presence. The pleasure of experiencing His strength in our weakness should fuel our desire to overcome hindrances to get to God's house for worship and prayer.

3. The pleasure of enjoying God Himself and His abundant goodness should fuel our desire to be in His house (84:10-12).

The psalmist makes three points in these wonderful verses:

A. The pleasure of being even at the doorstep of God's house is far better than all the pleasures of sin.

"For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (84:10). As Spurgeon puts it (*The Treasury of David* [Baker], 4:66-67), "The lowest station in connection with the Lord's house is better than the highest position among the godless.... God's worst is better than the devil's best." H. C. Leupold (*Exposition of Psalms* [Baker], p. 608) astutely observes: "It may seem to be a strong statement to describe those who are disinclined to worship the Lord as being guilty of wickedness. But that is where the root of all wickedness lies, shunning fellowship with God."

In a day when Christians frequently skip church to pursue recreation, I wonder how many could *honestly* say that one day of gathering with God's people to worship Him is better than a thousand days of other pursuits? Was the psalmist using hyperbole? Maybe, but don't shrug off his point: His pleasure in enjoying God in the company of God's people was greater than anything that the world has to offer. If we can't join him in these feelings, maybe we need to re-examine our values!

B. The pleasure of enjoying God Himself and His abundant goodness is incomparable.

"For the Lord God is a sun and a shield; the Lord gives grace and glory; no good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly" (84:11). There are probably several sermons in this one rich verse (Spurgeon has three!). I can only touch on it:

(1) The Lord God is a sun to us.

This is the only time in the Bible that God is directly referred to as the sun (but see Mal. 4:2; Luke 1:78-79). In Psalm 84, the metaphor is in the context of travelers. There were no lighted streets or cars with headlights. When you were traveling in the wilderness and it got dark, you had to stop. It got cold when the sun went down. Wolves howled in the darkness. So the travelers huddled together and waited for the dawn. The rising sun meant that you could see your way again. It brought warmth and cheer. It

brought a new day that would take you closer to God's lovely dwelling place, the temple.

The sun sustains all life on earth. It is a never-ending source of energy. It cheers our sagging spirits when it breaks through the clouds after a storm. Even so the Lord God is a sun to us.

(2) The Lord God is a shield to us.

The sun gives light and nourishes life, but the shield gives protection from enemies. Without the shield, we would be vulnerable to all sorts of dangers in our pilgrimage to heaven. The sun and the shield balance each other. With the sun only, a band of pilgrims would be more conspicuous to their enemies. So God also is a shield for them, keeping them safe to their journey's end.

(3) The Lord gives grace to us.

Grace humbles us because God only gives grace to the undeserving. If you earn it or deserve it, it is not grace, but a wage that is due (Rom. 4:4-5). Salvation is entirely due to God's gracious choice, apart from any foreseen faith or works, which would nullify grace (Rom. 11:6). We receive God's grace at salvation, but we also need His grace daily in order to walk with Him. God's abundant grace in Christ motivates us to serve Him (1 Cor. 15:10).

(4) The Lord gives glory to us.

This may refer to the future glory of heaven, but here it probably means (as Calvin explains it, p. 364-365), "that after God has once taken the faithful into his favor, he will advance them to high honor, and never cease to enrich them with his blessings."

(5) The Lord will not withhold any good thing from us.

Maybe you're thinking, "No good thing? How about a million dollars, Lord?" But that may not be a good thing for you! "How about good health?" That may not be a good thing, either! We have to interpret this promise in light of the many trials that the Bible shows God's saints enduring (Heb. 11:35b-39). This is where faith must operate. Although we may not understand God's purpose for our trials, "we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). In that sense, He does not withhold any good thing from us. But, there is a condition in our text:

- C. The requirement for enjoying God and His abundant blessings is to walk uprightly and to trust in Him.

The promise of God's not withholding any good thing is for those who walk uprightly (84:11). His blessing is on those who trust in Him (84:12). To walk uprightly is to live before God with integrity. It does not imply perfection, but it does mean that you walk openly before God, confessing your sin. You trust in His grace and strength to overcome sin. You seek to please God by obeying His commandments. To such people, the Lord will not withhold any good thing. They will join the psalmist (84:12) in exclaiming, "How blessed is the man who trusts in You!"

Conclusion

In 1714, Matthew Henry, the well-known pastor and Bible commentator, was on his deathbed at age 52. He was relatively young and had not finished his commentary (others finished it from his notes). He had endured the loss of his first wife and of three of his nine children. He could have complained about his hard life. But he said to a friend, "You have been used to take notice of the sayings of dying men. This is mine—that a life spent in the service of God, and communion with Him, is the most comfortable and pleasant life that one can live in the present world" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* [Revell], p. 1:xiv).

Don't believe Satan's lie that following God is a drag. Following the Lord is the most blessed life possible. The many pleasures that the Lord gives to satisfy your soul should fuel your desire to be in His presence, both individually and when His people gather to worship Him.

Application Questions

1. Many professing Christians say that they do not need the church. Is this a dangerous view? Why/why not?
2. Since in the NT, believers (not buildings) are God's temple, is it wrong to design church buildings to enhance worship?
3. Suppose that a Christian admits that he finds more pleasure in recreational pursuits than in church. How should he fix this?
4. If someone challenged you that verse 11b ("no good thing") is not true, how would you defend it?

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