

The Joy of Worship

Psalm 84

- ¹ How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!
- ² My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.
- ³ 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.
- ⁴ Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.
- ⁵ Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
- ⁶ As they go through the valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.
- ⁷ They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.
- ⁸ O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob!
- ⁹ Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.

¹⁰ 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 live in the tents of wickedness.

¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does the LORD withhold
from those who walk uprightly.

¹² O LORD of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

Theme Statement

The presence of the Lord in the Jerusalem temple brings joy to the pilgrims and all who gather. Together on homeland soil they rejoice in the Lord of hosts, who is benevolent and life sustaining. Refreshed and strengthened, they return home.

Exploring the Word

Pilgrims, headed to Jerusalem for a special festival, would sing this hymn of praise as they traveled along. They also sang it when they arrived in Jerusalem, especially as they processed to the temple to celebrate the annual enthronement of the anointed king. This psalm recognizes the king as God's chosen and focuses on the Lord God, who was above any earthly king and all other gods.

Pilgrims traveled from near and far to the temple. Some lived in Israel, but others came from nations much farther away. They were part of the dispersed people who, because of famine or some disaster, now had homes in other countries. The psalm makes it clear that they were all journeying to their true homeland and to the temple in Jerusalem, where God had promised to be present. This was a very meaningful journey and experience.

Psalm 84:1-3 Longing and joy

The pilgrims rejoice that the living God is present. They yearn to be close to the Lord God and to find the blessing and strength only God can give. They sing joyfully because they have finally come into the gracious presence of the "LORD of hosts." The title "LORD of hosts" is closely connected to the ark of the covenant that Israel carried from Mount Sinai to the promised land. This ark was God's continuing presence with Israel throughout its long journey out of slavery in Egypt. It was also carried into battle against Israel's enemies, assuring Israel that God was with them as a mighty warrior in the midst of their fight. Images of hosts (armies) of angels serving a mighty and powerful God who reigns in great glory come to mind when we hear the title "LORD of hosts." This God is on Israel's side and can be trusted to provide protection and life.

The metaphor in verse 3 is touching and tender. Even an ordinary sparrow is at home in the temple, sheltered and raising her young safely. The mighty warrior God, the Lord of hosts, also cares for the least of creatures. Here the psalmist proclaims that the Lord of hosts orders life in a benevolent and life-sustaining way for all creation.

Psalm 84:4-7 God is the one who blesses

Verses 4 and 5 are beatitudes praising the blessings God gives to God's people. The point is that those whose lives are centered on and shaped by the Lord God have chosen the path of life and goodness. This is blessing and strength that the world cannot give. Only God does. Evidence of this is that when the pilgrims go through the dry, lifeless valley of Baca, God provides the rain. The dry desert comes to life, and the thirsty pilgrims drink from springs of water. They are heartened by this, and their faith in God carries them onward.

Psalm 84:8-12 Pilgrims pray and rejoice

The entire gathered community asks for God's blessing on the anointed king, who is an earthly shield. As the king is blessed, so will the whole community be blessed. The gathering of all the people is a moving experience (v. 10). They have the joy of being united in faith and in their homeland now before God. This communion with God and others that this festival of enthronement brings is all that the pilgrims could hope for. It is better to be the humble door-keeper in the hot sun during this festival than to be back home in the shade of the tent of the wicked (Gentiles). God is both "sun" (life-giving) and "shield" (protector) and can be trusted (v. 12) as the source of all goodness and grace. Now the pilgrims can return home refreshed and strengthened.

The Word Today

Homecoming is a powerful word evoking deep feelings of longing and love. We all experience homecomings of some sort. What makes them meaningful and joyful? Below are two personal stories about homecoming in the church that may spark some thoughts.

Donna had been a longtime, much-involved member of her congregation. Now she was in nursing-home care. She was a good two-hour drive away from her home congregation. With no immediate family near her senior care center or her congregation, visits home were rare. But, oh, when she did get home! Her sister would drive two hours to the care center and then drive Donna another two hours south to the church. Donna was beaming with joy as her sister wheeled her into the building. "It means so much to be here!" she said over and over again. Receiving holy

communion was especially moving. There were tears in her eyes and in the eyes of others. Today I can still see her happy, expectant face at the rail.

At age twenty-four, Josh was totally disheartened when he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He had stopped coming to worship for about four years. Over this time his church had gone through two different pastors, and when the new one visited him in the hospital, he did not want to talk. The pastor did his best, emphasizing God's loving promise to help Josh. Josh said few words and refused holy communion. The pastor stayed in touch, but it was a one-way conversation. Almost a year had gone by when Josh showed up for Christmas Eve worship. Encouraged by his parents, he came forward to receive communion. At the end of worship, he could not bring himself to leave the church and wept in the back pew. "It's just been so long," he said. God's presence transformed Josh, helping him to let go of his loneliness and anger. Josh worshiped faithfully after that.

For Josh and Donna, the presence of God within a community of faith was healing and joyful. We can underestimate the power of God and the Holy Spirit in the life of the worshiping community of faith. God's gift of Jesus Christ in holy communion, baptism, and a worshiping community brings not only joy but also strength for life's journey. Through all of life, God is the source of everlasting goodness, strength, and grace. We can trust that!

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Complete this sentence: "For me, home is _____."
In what places or circumstances do you feel at home?

Exploring the Word

1. What does the title "LORD of hosts" mean in this psalm?
2. Describe the experience of the pilgrims in this psalm. What gives them joy?
3. What do we learn about God's character from Psalm 84:3?
4. How or why are the pilgrims happy and blessed (vv. 4-7)?
5. Why is the gathering of pilgrims in the temple courts (vv. 8-12) a meaningful experience?

The Word Today

1. In the list below place a "J" by the top three things that give you joy in congregational worship:

<input type="checkbox"/> Receiving holy communion	<input type="checkbox"/> Confession and absolution
<input type="checkbox"/> Fellowship	<input type="checkbox"/> Scripture reading
<input type="checkbox"/> Sermon	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Hymn singing	
2. Do you identify with Donna, Josh, or both? What in their stories touches you?
3. In what ways does your congregation (a) welcome visitors and new neighbors so they begin to feel at home and (b) gather in fellowship to build up the body of Christ?

Closing Prayer

Gather us, Lord, so we may share the joy of your grace together. Center us in your word and will. Connect us with fellow believers.

Lead us through the difficult times in our lives, always renewing our strength and faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Further Study

Psalm 24; Matthew 28:16-20

Daily Readings

M. Psalm 126	F. Philippians 4:4-9
T. John 15:9-17	S. Psalm 16
W. Nehemiah 8:9-12	S. Psalm 84
T. Philippians 2:1-11	

Memorization

Psalm 84:4

Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.