

PM Psalm 84 Birds in the Church

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[0 : 00] Psalm 84. Psalm 84. It begins with a superscription that says, To the choir master, according to the Gitteth, 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. Selah. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

As they go through the valley of Beka, they make it a place of springs. The early rain also covers it with pools.

[1 : 21] 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. Selah. Behold our shield, O God. Look in the face of your anointed.

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.

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. Amen.

[2 : 28] I have a text for tonight's sermon. It would be verse 3 of Psalm 84.

Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young. Come at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. When I was growing up, and we sang Psalm 84 in public worship, I was always intrigued by the thought of birds flying around the church. It seemed to me that while it appeared to have been alright in the Jerusalem where God was being worshipped in that psalm, that it would have caused consternation in Easter Ross or Glasgow to have swallows swooping round the pulpit, or sparrows having a breather there, never mind nesting. Behold, the sparrow findeth out an house wherein to rest, the swallow also for herself hath purchased a nest, even thine own altars where she's safe her young ones forth may bring.

[3 : 56] O thou almighty Lord of hosts, thou art my God and King. Now that I'm a little older, well, a lot older, I have been blessed to observe, first hand, a more relaxed attitude to health and safety in some Indian and Nepali churches, where there was not the same outcry against shared facilities, though the birds were not exactly welcomed.

And my own response to this remarkable verse of Scripture has changed from one of wonderment and mild amusement and incomprehension as a child to one of wonderment still, but wonderment shrouded in awe.

Awe at the grace and goodness of almighty God who created these amazing creatures in the first place, the work of his fingers, and who didn't consider them out of place in his sanctuary, unlike fallen mankind, whose sin and rebellion had created a wall of separation from the God who lovingly crafted him and her as the pinnacle of his creative genius.

Well, we'll come back to verse 3 in a few minutes, but let's take an overview of the psalm first. Now, while we relegate the superscription of the psalm to small print in our Bibles, the Hebrew psalms, the ones our Lord sang himself, had that superscription as the first verse of the psalm.

And it contains important information. In fact, four pieces of information. For the director of music, or to the choir master, according to the gitteth, of the sons of Korah, a psalm.

[6 : 17] And in the ESV, the last two pieces are linked as a psalm of the sons of Korah. Without belaboring the point, this was meant to be and was sung by a choir in the temple under the

directorship of the choir master, the Levite appointed for that specific aspect of the temple worship. And a man gifted by God for that specific purpose. And according to the gitteth, well, the precise meaning of that phrase has been lost in antiquity.

But of course, that doesn't imply that it is meaningless. Quite the contrary. It is meaningful.

Only we do not have certainty as to the correct meaning. But many believe that gitteth is very close to the word gittite, the adjective derived from the place gath of Goliath theme and referred to a particular instrument or style of music from gath that was thought to be most fitting for this psalm. Now we know ourselves that the grandeur of ye gates lift up your heads on high is quite different from the initial melancholy of Lord from the depths to thee I cried.

[7 : 44] And so the tunes that we sing are different in style and tempo. So, according to the gitteth seems to indicate a style of music or accompaniment sympathetic to the message of this wonderful psalm.

And as I was brought up, only the tune Harrington would do. Harrington according to the gitteth perhaps. There are, of course, other possible explanations such as gitteth referring to a threshing floor or winepress and so some people suggest it's a psalm of harvest time.

I prefer the former explanation. I find that more persuasive. And then we have a psalm of the sons of Korah. This is really important to our understanding of the psalm.

Now, Korah, a Levite who was a cousin of Moses in Numbers 16 is recorded as leading a rebellion against Moses and against God.

And God's anger was so hot against Korah and his fellow rebels that the earth opened her mouth and swallowed him and all that appertained to them.

[9 : 05] Close quotes. Numbers 16, 31 to 33. And in the book of Jude, we're issued with a very stark warning not to behave like Korah.

However, God's grace to fall in Israel was such that as Numbers 26, 11 tells us, the sons of Korah did not die.

1 Chronicles 6 gives us a bit of the genealogy of the descendants of Levi and it goes on in verse 31 there to tell us, these are the men whom David put in charge of the service of song in the house of the Lord after the ark rested there.

They ministered with song before the tabernacle of the tent of meeting until Solomon built the house of the Lord in Jerusalem and then they performed their service there in the way that they had been ordained to do.

And it goes on to specify Haman, H-E-M-A-N who was descended from Korah and Asaph who came down through Gershom's line as the main singers, the soloists, the presenters even.

[10 : 19] But David also appointed the sons of Korah to be gatekeepers as well as musicians. In 1 Chronicles 23 we read how David gathered all the leaders of Israel together and the priests and the Levites.

There were at that time 38,000 Levites. 24,000 of these David said shall have charge of the work in the house of the Lord.

6,000 shall be officers and judges. 4,000 gatekeepers. And 4,000 shall offer praises to the Lord with the instruments that I have made for praise.

And then 1 Chronicles 26 goes on to tell us about all the different divisions of these gatekeepers.

There's a wonderful irony in all of this of course that Korah the rebel in Numbers 16 he argued insolently that it wasn't just priests who should be able to offer incense but all the Levites.

And here in Psalm 84 we have the sons of Korah whose God-given skills and giftings were not just singing God's praises but guarding the very gates of God's house against the practices their forefather espoused and was put to death for.

[11 : 50] So their job was to guard against communion with God in his house being taken lightly. They were there to ensure that not just anyone could roll up and wander in.

And their life work was to prevent the sin of Korah their ancestor happening again. So Psalm 84 belonging to the sons of Korah comes with a depth of insight and family history with intensity of feeling and responsibility of commitment and service which we should not forget as we read the psalm and take it to ourselves.

Because these psalms of course are meant to be taken and understood at many levels. They were compositions that combined prayer and praise.

They're first and foremost the word of God. They're inspired by God's spirit and breathed into existence through holy men of God like David and the sons of Korah scribing them. They were Israel's psalms collected and collated and used in worship in song and as prayers prayers to the God of their life.

[13:18] They were also Jesus' psalms. These were what he sang. And our understanding of them should be graced with the thought that he is the word and these beautiful poems have special relevance to his character and experiences and ministry.

And as followers of the risen Lord Jesus these are our psalms too. They have great relevance to us and our lives as we take the truths and the comfort to apply balm to our souls.

there's something else to keep in mind before we look into the psalm and it may be struck you as we read it together and that is that four times in verses 1, 3, 8 and 12 the name used to address God is Lord of hosts.

Now this is not a term used in the New Testament. Yahweh Sabeoth is the name and most commentators would consider hosts to have military connotations.

It is a fighting a combative name. It takes us back to Moses and the children of Israel standing on the shore of the Red Sea with the Egyptians in hot pursuit Exodus 14 13 and Moses said to the people fear not stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord which he will work for you today for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again.

[15:00] The Lord will fight for you and you have only to be silent. The next time God willing I come here if ever I'm asked back I will explain to you how were it not for that verse of scripture I would not be alive.

So we have the Lord who fights for his people the Lord of the armies of heaven the Lord who has supreme power and who cannot be defeated Lord almighty Lord of the hosts of heaven the Lord of hosts Alex Mottier a well respected Old Testament scholar translates this Yahweh of hosts and the further we push down into the meaning of this the less coherent we become because we run out of words and expressions to capture the essence of I am that I am bringing his unlimited power to intercede on behalf of his beloved people the recipients of his great grace and unmerited love that is whom the sons of Korah are addressing in Psalm 84 so

Psalm 84 has been penned by the sons of Korah the gatekeepers and the songsters handed on to the choir master possibly Haman the Korahite to be sung according to the Gitteth in praise of Yahweh of hosts the almighty Lord so we have then by whom the psalm was composed to whom it was sung how it was to be sung and even who was to arrange the singing but what about the content of the psalm and in consequence the occasion of the psalms singing Psalm 84 is a psalm of blessedness and it is a psalm of pilgrimage there's a real sense of occasion about this psalm because it celebrates obedience to God's commands and the blessedness that derives from that obedience back in

Exodus 23 the Israelites were commanded by God three times a year you're to celebrate a festival to me in Exodus 34 we get the same injunction three times a year all your men are to appear before the sovereign Lord the God of Israel and in Deuteronomy chapter 16 we get more details three times a year all your men must appear before the Lord you got at the place he will choose at the festival of unleavened bread Passover in the spring the festival of weeks Pentecost seven weeks or fifty days after Passover and the festival of tabernacles or booths in the autumn as we thought about this morning no one should appear before the Lord empty handed it says each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the Lord your God has blessed you and it seems very likely that the pilgrimage we read of in this Psalm 84 was the part fulfillment of these commands this is what the

Lord Jesus did too the Gospels time and time again talk about Jesus going up to Jerusalem to this feast or that feast he was demonstrating obedience but it was also his joy was it not to be about his father's business in his father's house a house for which he showed such zeal as we read about it in John chapter 2 but there were of course particular routes the pilgrims to Jerusalem took these journeys were not random events they were along designated highways and they were undertaken in communion with other people because come the start of each feast there might actually be hundreds of thousands of extra visitors to Zion to Jerusalem we can scarcely get our heads round the idea of such crowds when we are used to the open spaces of Dumfries and Galloway but if we think of the crowds at a football match well maybe not

[19 : 50] Palmerston Park but at a football match in Glasgow or at the departure lounge of Heathrow we get a better idea except think about this that mass of humanity had common purpose and that was to worship God to acknowledge his blessing and to give thanks in prayer and song and with practical gifts too according to how God had blessed them so Psalm 84 is a psalm of blessedness and it's a psalm of pilgrimage the journey of course nominally is to God's house but actually it is a journey to meet with the occupant of the house God himself this Psalm splits neatly into three sections please have your Bibles open and just keep scanning the verses as I chatter on verses 1 to 4 we read of the blessedness of the pilgrim's goal his objective verses 5 to 9 we read of the blessedness of the pilgrim's journey and in 10 to 12 we read of the blessedness of the pilgrim's God now each of these sections talks of blessedness verses 4 5 and 12 we do well to understand what blessed means some Bible translations begin Psalm 1 verse 1 word 1 blessed so it's integral to our thinking about the Psalms and about our relationship with God the Hebrew word translated blessed has three possible meanings depending on the context the first is blessed as in blessed by God his face shining on us his favour rejoicing our way the second meaning is happy in how we're placed or what we're doing the third meaning is doing what's appropriate what is morally justified or right what is deserved and in

Psalm 84 the whole tenor of the Psalm makes the happy meaning the most likely but in truth all three meanings could apply blessed enjoying God's favour happy and morally justified let's go through it verse at a time verse 1 highlights the loveliness of God's house but of course it is lovely only by association salvation because it is knowing God's presence that permits drinking from that river of delight and O Lord of hosts emphasises the protection of God the warrior God over and protection of his people and that's something to be cherished because sin our sin may so easily get in the way and before we know it as we read in 1 Samuel the glory has departed our national church is such an example verse 2 most beautifully describes the intensity of the longing the yearning to meet with God in his house you get the impression as you read it that it hurts a bit like being in love perhaps lovesick the emotion and the longing is so intense my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living

God external and internal joy here there may be audible physical singing and shouts of joy but the very core of the psalmist being his heart and soul are bursting into paeans of praise we'll come back to verse 3 later verse 4 emphasises the blessedness the divine blessing the happiness the rightness of praising God all the time not just now and then and of course it states something that for the psalmist was not possible if taken literally no one was allowed to dwell in God's house but we could reasonably understand the metaphorical use of the word dwelling because we speak the same way oh see her she lives in Tesco never out of the place when we mean not actually that she lives there but she frequents the store without actually having it as her postal address so we've got the blessedness of the pilgrim's goal here in verses 1 to 4 reaching that goal and being embraced in God's presence but getting there the pilgrim's journey we've thought about a bit already to be sure this is a physical journey but it's a spiritual journey too and the physical trip would not take place with any real meaning unless the heart was right in the first place now the second half of verse 5 there defines this with the sweetest of poetry it describes the blessedness of the pilgrim in whose heart are the highways to Zion it literally says highways are in his heart

I can't help but think of the old chorus we're marching to Zion beautiful beautiful Zion but we don't do this in our own strength the blessedness as it says is for those whose strength is in Yahweh of hosts and in whose hearts are the highway to Zion Isaiah says something very similar in chapter 35 verse 8 let me read it to you verse 9 and a highway shall be there and it shall be called the way of holiness the unclean shall not pass over it it shall belong to those who walk in the way even if they're fools they shall not go astray no lion shall be there nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it they shall not be found there but the redeemed shall walk there and the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to

[26 : 54] Zion with singing everlasting joy shall be upon their heads they shall obtain gladness and joy and sorrow and sighing shall flee away don't fail to notice that this resonates through Revelation 21 and what lies in the future for the child of God verse 6 in Psalm 84 tells us of the valley of Beka that's a really dry place the valley of balsam trees perhaps an arid place but the joy of the pilgrim turns this into a place of springs well springs blessed by God with the autumn rains maybe it was the feast of tabernacles the psalmist was celebrating and verse 7 far from being discouraged by this dry valley the pilgrims go from strength to strength as they achieve their goal of coming to

Zion and there they are met with the gatekeeper sons of Korah ready to keep them at arm's length if all is not as it should be but just as ready to rejoice with them and sing with them if they are right with God as they bring their sincere thanks and praise and gifts to God and verses 8 and 9 describe journey's end and we can see the pilgrim rejoicing in God's presence engaging in the fellowship of prayer to God and praying for the Davidic line the anointed that it speaks of there God save the king in other words you can hear echoes of one of David's Psalms 143 in this hear my prayer oh God give ear to my plea for mercy in your faithfulness answer me in your righteousness so we have the blessedness of the pilgrim's goal the blessedness of the pilgrim's journey and in 10 to 12 the blessedness of the pilgrim's

God verse 10 the sons of Korah just wouldn't have it any other way all that the world has to offer all the deceitfulness of sin it's anathema to them they actually love their job how often do people nowadays moan about not being happy at work if only this and if only that they've got no job satisfaction but these boys would sooner have a day doing the Lord's bidding his work than a thousand days in another job they prize what they do it is worth remembering that our heavenly father has put us where we are for his purposes in his wisdom and in his grace it is very easy to look around at other people and envy other people's jobs and what is happening to them in their lives but there is nothing compared to being a gatekeeper in the house of our God doing his bidding verse 11 is pure gold sweeter than honey from the honeycomb it's about

God's grace we have first God as son that's the only place in scripture that the word son s-u-n is used of God specifically he's the giver of good the giver of energy the source from whom blessings flow to his people he is shield the protector of his people from harm he's the bestower of favour and honour that's grace covenant grace we don't receive what we deserve in punishment but we receive favour and honour we don't deserve imputed to us through the righteousness of the crucified risen ascended Christ Jesus but more than that as the metrical version says he'll grace and glory give he will withhold no good from them that uprightly deliver glory is our eternal home the upright living is Christ's imputed righteousness see the progression in these last three verses wickedness abandoned in verse 10 godly character developing in verse 11 the ongoing attitude of trust in verse 12 indeed happy justified anointed with god's pleasure is the pilgrim who arrives in zion and who continues to trust into the future the very yahweh who deploys the armies of heaven to protect his child god's so gracious to speak to us in this way in his word we each are the pilgrim this word is for us but it was a word for our lord to think of that last pilgrimage she made from that town called Ephraim John 11 past Samaria down the Jordan valley up to Jericho and then as we thought this morning going up to Jerusalem to death reread the psalm thinking these thoughts and putting the context of our lord's final journey into this psalm of pilgrimage and blessedness but we've got unfinished business with verse 3 so briefly to the birds there are so many amazing lessons to learn from this spirit filled verse the first is what sort of birds were allowed to roost and nest in God's house well there are two sorts mentioned the first is sparrows now some older translations say turtles or turtle doves but the Hebrew word is quite generic and birders nowadays would probably call them wee brown jobs as in unidentified ordinary wee birds however to mix our metaphors with [33 : 24] Arnold Clark these birds are basic models they're amazing enough in their own right but they've got no frills they've got an accelerator brake and clutch for sure but they're no frill birds and remember how our lord in Matthew 10 29 said are not two sparrows sold for a penny and not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father so sparrows cheap if you'll pardon the pun cheerful and very common second type of bird mentioned in verse 3 is a swallow and the Hebrew defines this as a rapidly gyrating bird and all the translations agree swallow but swallows are the Aston Martins of the bird world they're sleek fast manoeuvrable extraordinary GPS and sat nav power assisted braking wonderful trim metallic iridescent paint the point is that there is no bar no band depending on the level of sophistication of these birds these birds are accepted by God into his sanctuary and our minds cannot but be drawn to Galatians 3 and 28 where there's neither

Jew nor Greek neither slave nor free there's no male or female for you are all one in Christ Jesus the next wonderful realisation is that both kinds of birds are free spirits they love liberty and they go where they please they are not trapped in God's house but these birds of verse 3 have chosen to stay and nest there and even bring up their young there you could even say that they've exercised their free will for though where they have chosen to stay might seem a bit dangerous to those outside they actually feel safe and they've reasoned to feel safe because they are there by God's permission in fact by his plan in in fact Jesus words again come to our minds that not one sparrow

will fall to the ground without our heavenly father knowing and willing it maybe they were preordained to nest there so that sinners like you and I might marvel at the arrangements our heavenly father makes to challenge and encourage us three millennia later as we ponder the activities of these birds the next thing is that the birds are allowed to perch probably on the cedar rafters of Solomon's temple if this psalm was written a little later than David's time or in the superstructure of the temporary tent or tabernacle that David had erected to house the Ark of the Covenant while the temple was being planned and constructed the birds may even have perched on the holy thing the furniture the lamp stand and so on when as humankind fallen man could not even be admitted to the premises basically this exclusion was because of sin deliberately choosing my own will in the garden forfeiting the right to God's presence and communion with him and Israel's history and our own histories ratify God's judgment do they not of our utter unworthiness to approach our creator but what our psalm tells us is that the perching and nesting were near God's altars plural and now we start to tremble because those altars are types of Jesus Christ there were two altars the one was the altar of sacrifice without the shedding of blood there could be no remission of sins the other was the altar of incense sweet smelling incense rising from a formula prescribed in Exodus by God himself Jesus was sacrificed on Calvary for our sins Jesus Paschal offering of himself for us was that sweet smelling savour which satisfied the righteousness of our holy God Hebrews 13 the second half tells us about that altar and the high priest sacrifice for sin and there's more than a hint of jealousy in the psalmist comments here and the birds dwelling there doing something that devout Israelites couldn't do neither he who wrote it the son of Korah or them the sons of Korah nor not even as door keepers could they go in there and the priests couldn't just go in there and the high priest couldn't just go in there except once a year and that was just utterly incomprehensible and a source of jealousy to the sons of Korah those birds can get in there and I can't the ordinary basic model sparrows and the super sophisticated swallows in and out and those comments are followed by an explosion of praise and adulation as the writer holy hands raised perhaps and head bowed addresses his maker with four names [39 : 39] I am that I am of the heavenly armies my God and my King now I know that the writer's heart's brimming over with love and with longing and yearning to meet with God but I'm convinced it's the picture of these wonderful birds these works of God's fingers their innocence their acceptance their privilege of cohabitation with the awesome presence of God that they call out this explosion of praise there is the almighty Yahweh God and King and all his majesty protecting these little birds how much more then is the pinnacle of God's creative genius fallen in Adam but brought near through sacrifice and the shedding of Christ's blood brought near and into God's presence of course this all finds its culmination in Calvary Calvary changes everything because Calvary removes the barrier which prevents access to communion with our maker the price has been paid by

Jesus we are restored because of his shed blood his sacrifice let's read Hebrews 10 19 therefore brothers and sisters since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain that is his body and since we have a great priest over the house of God let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess for he who promised is faithful so as we go home tonight let's meditate on these things Derek Prime who used to be the minister in

Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh wrote an A to Z of retirement and he defines meditation M for meditation as being occupied with God I think of that often so let us be occupied with thoughts of the saving grace of our Lord whose sacrifice of his own life for us coalesced with the rending of the curtain of separation from the presence of Yahweh of hosts from top to bottom enabling us just like the sparrows and the swallows to dwell in God's house and oh the blessedness when by God's grace and because the Lord Jesus paid the price for our sins on the cross of Calvary as we trust him not only do we have access into the temple we find to our amazement 1 Corinthians 6 19 that we ourselves are the temple itself where God lives by his spirit Amen let's pray