Solar Deliverance: Psalm 84:11 in Light of its Cultural and Canonical Context

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[0:00] Thanks for that warm welcome, Alexandra. Wonderful to be with you all again. A little known fact, although my face is maybe not familiar to most of you, when I first came to St. John's five years ago, Learner's Exchange is actually where I first got connected.

So the warmth of this community has really been a blessing to me, so thanks for having me back. Let's maybe pray before we launch into our topic for today. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this day.

We thank you that we have gathered in the name of Jesus Christ. In this particular room, as we seek to think rightly about you, we pray, Holy Spirit, that you would illuminate our thinking and soften our hearts and banish all sinfulness.

May you be glorified in all that we do today. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. All right. So, oh, that clock over there is wrong, so I'm just going to make sure that I stay on time.

All right. Okay. So, by way of introduction to the topic, I'm going to make one small amendment to the title of my lecture, which you might have noticed in the bulletin. The original title was Soldier Deliverance, Psalm 84, in light of its cultural and canonical context.

[1:27] The title I'd like to have given, which I'll formally use today, is Soldier Deliverance, Psalm 84, verse 11, in light of its cultural and canonical context.

Fairly small difference, but one reason for the change is that if we were going to attempt an excavation of all the historical and cultural issues lying behind the entire psalm, we could not possibly do that in one lecture.

We'll deal with the entire psalm because we should read it as a unit, but we'll only focus on the cultural and canonical context for verse 11. And another reason to narrow our focus is that in verse 11 we have a rather poignant and striking metaphor, which I think is worthy of some extended consideration.

The psalmist writes, For the Lord God is a sun and a shield. Grace and honor he bestows. Now, the metaphor of shield is fairly regular in the psalms, and so we're probably quite familiar with it.

But what about the sun? What's being said about the Lord when the psalmist compares him to the sun? How should we read this metaphor? Now, most modern commentaries I've read see this as a metaphor for providence, that is to say God is the source of life, like the sun is in our life.

[2:45] It's true that God is the source of life, but I don't think that's actually a contextually responsible interpretation of this metaphor. And it doesn't fit very well with the rest of the psalm, and it really doesn't fit well with the ancient Near Eastern context.

So, one assumption of this lecture, which I fleshed out in my last one. If you're curious, I think it's still on the website. You could listen to it. I'd love to hear your feedback.

One of the assumptions I have now, which I argued for then, is that metaphors are characterized by their ability to smuggle in a great deal of cognitive freight. Good metaphors succinctly and strikingly express tremendously rich and complex concepts, in a short, punchy phrase.

So, a biblical example of this is Jesus' pronouncement in John 6, I am the bread of life. This metaphor not only causes us to reflect on the miracle we just witnessed, when Jesus feeds the 5,000, it also draws us back to Exodus, and the bread provided in the wilderness to the Israelites.

And, when we read this metaphor, in light of Luke 22, and the institution of the Lord's Supper, when Jesus says, this is my body which is given for you, we're drawn deep into contemplation of a very particular metaphor.

[4:01] Contemplation of this metaphor is so central to Christianity, that it's woven into the very liturgical rhythm of the church. So, because metaphors are heavily reliant upon context, they have the power to draw on deep networks of cultural assumptions.

Metaphors invite a seeing as, and we always learn to see within a particular place. So, when we get metaphors from different times, different places, different cultures, we run the risk of jumping headfirst into an interpretation, and we bring too much of our own cultural experience to bear.

We miss out on a great deal of what the metaphor might offer us, and, indeed, what the original author might have intended to communicate to us. So, in order to understand a metaphor well, we need to attend to the broader cultural context.

So, to that end, our lecture today will begin by casting the net very widely, and then we'll move in to Psalm 8411. We've got a fair bit of content to get through, but I trust that by the end, you'll have found it helpful and perhaps even edifying.

So, the first question we're going to address today, how did ancient Near Eastern cultures portray the sun? So, if you have a passing familiarity with the ancient Near East, and that's, roughly speaking, Mesopotamia and the Levant, during the Bronze and Iron Age, when Israel was a political entity, the time of the Bible, you'd know that many of those cultures worshipped the sun, either directly or indirectly, as the manifestation of the presence of a solar deity.

[5:45] So, distinguishing between those two positions, between cultures who actually worshipped the sun as an object, and those who worshipped a god that was represented by the sun, it's a little bit tough to figure out which is which sometimes.

But in either case, there was a lot of sun worship going on in ancient cultures. So, the Hittites, for example, worshipped a triad of solar deities. The Akkadians and the Babylonians worshipped a sun god called Shemesh.

The Egyptians, of course, had the sun god Ra, who later fuses into the creator sun god Amon Ra, and polytheistic religions, as a rule, see divinity lurking in nearly all natural phenomena.

So, it's not too surprising that these cultures have solar deities, because the sun is very central to life on Earth. Now, one difficulty that we have when we try to study these religious systems is that the pantheons in the ancient Near East are typically quite complex and sometimes even contradictory affairs.

This is especially true in Egyptian religion. One Ugaritic scholar puts it this way. One of the problems modern man encounters here is trying to comprehend polytheistic reasoning.

[7:00] The deified nature is absolutely swarming with deities. The consequence being that the thinking behind these systems is rather wild and woolly, and not terribly systematic.

But despite this difficulty, we can actually isolate a few key themes which emerge in the ancient Near Eastern understanding of the sun. And they're worth considering, because I think they'll help us understand how the sun functioned as a symbol in the Bible.

So, we'll begin with the Hittites. The Hittites were actually not a Semitic people. They're grouped with the Anatolian branch of the Indo-European linguistic community, if you know anything about that.

So, European sort of. Not Semitic. Their empire was north of Palestine and west of Assyria, so that's roughly modern-day Turkey.

And they experienced their time in the sun from roughly 1600 B.C. until 1200 B.C., so about 400 years. And then they splinter into some city states, and they're absorbed by the Nero-Assyrian Empire.

[8:11] So, as I mentioned before, the Hittites worshipped three solar deities that we know of, at least. And we have three, actually, really good copies of a prayer to one of their sun gods.

His name is Ishtanu. And in these prayers, Ishtanu is called upon to advocate on behalf of an unnamed human who has angered another god. And the identity of this angry god is unknown to us, and, incidentally, to the supplicant who's offering the prayer, which gives us some insight into the religious mood of the Hittites.

That is to say, the Hittites did not consider the divine order to be reliable, but rather capricious and occasionally petty. So, if things go poorly for you, that means that God is angry with you, or with your conduct.

You hadn't offered the right sacrifices, or you'd transgressed holy ground. Maybe you'd fought and killed someone who had a patron deity that was stronger than your patron deity.

Hopefully, at the very least, you'd know which god you'd angered, but that wasn't always the case. Hence this prayer to the unknown god. So, in either case, if you as a Hittite found yourself in such a situation, the sun god Ishtanu was a god you could call upon to advocate for you.

[9:24] And, interestingly enough, even thieves and evil men could have Ishtanu as an advocate. So, he functions like something of a safety net in the Hittite religious system.

Everyone could come before him. And this particular prayer we're going to read opens with an invocation. O sun god, my lord, just lord of judgment, king of heaven and earth, you are ruling the lands, you are giving victory, you are just and merciful, you act upon invocations, you are merciful, O sun god, and you take pity.

The just man is dear to you and you are exalting him. O sun god, the most vigorous son of Ningal, your beard is of lapis lazuli. And it goes on and on. The invocation was very, very important. He had to show proper deference.

So, the opening to this prayer is very typical, and there's always this kind of unctuous tone of praise. And if we compare this prayer with the prayers to other Hittite deities, we see that there are, in fact, many kings of heaven, many who rule the lands, many who give victories, many who act upon invocations, many who have a beard of lapis lazuli.

These things aren't unique to Ishtanu, but what is unique to Ishtanu is that Ishtanu is a god of justice. Just lord of judgment, we just read.

[10:36] You are just and merciful. The just man is dear to you. There's a bit of a theme there. And the prayer continues. O sun god, mighty king, son of Ningal, you established the custom and the law of the land.

Among the gods you are favored. A just lord of government are you, father and mother of the dark lands. You, O sun god, are father and mother of the oppressed and lonely person. You restore the claims of the lonely and the oppressed.

So, from this portion of the prayer, we see not only is Ishtanu a just god, but he's also responsible for establishing customs and laws and for caring for the oppressed and the lonely.

Shortly after this excerpt, which I just read, Ishtanu is actually called the advocate of the dog and the pig. So, two animals which ranked rather lowly in the ancient Near Eastern worldview. Kind of interesting.

And this dimension of Ishtanu's justice is expressed with a particular metaphor, which we can see in the following quote. You, my god, this is later in the same prayer, return to me honor and strength.

[11:38] O sun god, you are the shepherd of all, and your message is sweet to everyone. So, not only is the sun god a god of justice, but he's a god who shepherds injustice.

And the supplicant, having offered this extended invocation in which he flatters, praises, demonstrates appropriate deference, he then transitions into the supplication itself. The bulk of it isn't interesting for our current aims, but a short section comes out and it touches on one final theme.

So, this is near the end of his actual supplication. Then the fellow addressing the god says, But now, what have I, a human, done to you? The merchant man holds the scales under the sun and falsifies the scales.

But I, what have I done to my god? So here, the person praying is declaring his innocence. And as a counter example, he offers a merchant who falsifies the scales.

So we see not only is Ishtenu's justice concerned with laws and customs and with shepherding the weak, he's also concerned with just business practices, which seems logical enough because that's a concrete way to care for the weak.

[12:52] Now, you've probably already started to make some connections of your own between this prayer and the language the Old Testament uses about the Lord sometimes. But before we move onto the canonical context for Psalm 84, we're going to consider an ancient Near Eastern hymn, this time from Babylon, both to demonstrate the prevalence of the themes we've seen because they come up a lot, surprisingly enough, and it'll also help us fill out a little bit more fully themes that we have seen.

So we'll do that with an Akkadian hymn to the sun god Shamash. A little bit more background. The Akkadian Empire is the first Semitic empire in the ancient Near East.

They're one of the first civilizations we actually know about. They came after the Sumerians. And the people groups in that region eventually form into the Assyrian and the Babylonian empires, which we're familiar with as Bible readers.

So culturally and religiously speaking, there's actually a great deal of continuity between the Akkadians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians. They have very similar thoughts about life. And they all share in the worship of a sun god Shamash, which is cognate with the biblical Hebrew word for the sun, Shamash.

Another interesting connection. And the Babylonian hymn to Shamash goes as follows. Shamash, illuminator of all the whole heaven, who makes light the darkness for mankind above and below.

[14:12] Gods and other world gods rejoice when you appear. Your rays are ever mastering secrets. At the brightness of your light, humankind's footprints become visible. You blunt the horns of a scheming villain, the perpetrator of a cunning deal is undermined.

You show the roguish judge the inside of a jail. He who takes the fee but does not carry through, you make him bear punishment. The one who receives no fee but takes up the case of the weak is pleasing to Shamash.

He will make long his life, the careful judge who gives just verdicts. So, already in this short excerpt, we can observe a few similarities to that previous prayer to Ishtanu.

After a brief physical description, Shamash is being praised as a god who's concerned with justice. He blunts the horns of a scheming villain. He shows the roguish judge the inside of a jail.

And he's also concerned with the weak because the one who takes up the case of the weak is pleasing to Shamash. And Shamash is also concerned with just business practices, which we learn as we continue in this hymn.

[15:14] He who commits fraud as he holds the dry measure, who pays loans by the small standard, demands repayment by the extra standard. Before his time, the people's curse will take effect on him.

But the honest merchant, who pays loans by the extra standard, thereby to make extra virtue, is pleasing to Shamash. So, it's weights and measures and whether or not the business person is being fair with them, if you didn't get that.

And we also read in the same hymn, the feeble one calls to you, the meek, the weak, the oppressed, the submissive, the shepherd in afflictions, the herdsman in trouble, the keeper of sheep among the enemy. So, just like the Hittite deity, Shamash is concerned with the weak.

And this theme of care and deliverance for the weak and oppressed is actually quite regularly expressed in the law codes of the ancient Near East, such as the code of Hammurabi, which many of us probably have heard of.

You can see it at the Louvre. It's just breathtaking. And atop this giant basalt stele, is actually a depiction of a seated Shamash. And he's got rays coming out of his shoulders, being worshipped by Hammurabi.

[16:19] So it's also noteworthy, even though it doesn't come up in this particular excerpt, that Shamash is also spoken of as a shepherd on several occasions. So one other hymn says, you shepherd all that is endowed with life.

So to summarize and generalize from these two examples, solar deities, pretty much all of them, in the ancient Near East are strongly associated with justice, with the rule of law, and with customs, both human and divine.

And these tendencies express themselves in terms of guidance to the giving of the law, the revealing of oracles, deliverance through protection of travelers, the oppressed, concern for fair business practice, and there's a great deal more going on in these religions, to be fair, and unfortunately, we don't have time to consider the other solar deity, Ra, and our resident Egyptologist isn't here today, so he won't give me any grief.

At an intuitive level, this seems to make some sense. The sun, after all, does illuminate our state of affairs. And even today, in a world with a great deal of artificial light, shady deeds, are often undertaken at night.

In English, we can speak of something not standing the light of day, by which we need to say that the thing will be found wanting upon closer scrutiny. Or we can talk of the facts coming to light, which again carries connotations of justice, or at the very least, justness.

[17:50] Now, in the ancient Near East, this justice works itself out in a variety of ways, as we've just discussed. And the theologies of these cultures differ substantially, but at the more general level, we can say they have a common understanding of what the sun represents.

The notion that the sun functions as a symbol, and not just as a god, is further demonstrated in ancient Near Eastern language about the king. So generally speaking, the king can also be spoken of as the sun.

He, as the representative of the gods, also has a radiant face. In Egypt, this is especially true since the pharaoh is actually the divine son of Ra. But the language of the king's face shining is also attested in Hittite and Ugaritic, where he's also explicitly called the sun.

So there's a link between sun, justice, sun and the king, the king and justice. It's kind of a triad. So, that's the background context to the ancient Near East. Now we'll move on to the canonical context.

Everyone still with me? Excellent. So, just to be precise, when I use the phrase canonical context, I'm referring to the entire collection of books we find in the Hebrew Bible, our Christian Old Testament.

[19:12] There are probably many fruitful roads into the New Testament with sun imagery, but my own research stopped at the book of Malachi, so that's as far as we're going to go today. Now, the relationship between the canon and the historical nation of Israel is an interesting and vexed one, and it's hotly debated in modern scholarship, but I'm going to bracket out that issue and instead operate on the assumption, I'm preaching to the choir here, I realize, but not everyone thinks this, the whole collection of books which we have in the Old Testament offer a coherent and continuous message.

We can observe shifts in focus, vocabulary, syntax, but in the main, the conceptual world of the Old Testament is very stable. So, because I take this perspective, it's methodologically appropriate to compare solar images across the entire canon to see how does the Bible speak about the sun.

So, the second question we'll address today, how does the Old Testament portray the sun? And the first point, which needs to be explicitly stated since we're comparing the Old Testament with the ancient Near East, is that the sun in the Old Testament is a demythologized object within the created order.

It has no more power than that which is given to it by its creator, our Lord God, who set it in the heavens and pronounced it good. For all the comparisons which we might make between these two conceptual worlds, this is, more than anything else, is a distinct and decisive contrast.

So, there's a beautiful verse, Deuteronomy 4, 19. This is when Moses is passing on the word of the Lord to the Israelites, and he says, And beware, lest you raise your eyes to the heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you'll be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.

[21:01] So, very clear. Sun worship, absolutely forbidden. There is a distinct thread of thought in biblical scholarship today, which actually goes all the way back to the 19th century skeptical German academia, which contends that during the United Monarchy, Israel worshipped a solar Yahweh.

Now, that may have been true in part. In Ezekiel 8, for example, we read about the abominations going on in the temple of the Lord, and one of those things was sun worship. And we'll run into another example in a moment, actually.

But, saying that some Israelites worship the sun is a far cry from saying the Old Testament implicitly endorses the worship of a solar deity. That's simply false.

So, with that foundational point made, let's examine a couple examples of solar language, which actually patterned fairly closely after ancient Near Eastern language. The first will be 2 Samuel 23.

So, here we are. Now, these are the last words of David, the oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who is raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel.

[22:16] The spirit of the Lord speaks to me, his word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken, the rock of Israel has said to me. When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.

So, 2 Samuel 23 contains the last words of David in a poetic oracle. And the central concern of the oracle is the covenantal relationship between the Lord and David's house.

We saw that in verse 5. Now, the central metaphor used of God is rock, zur, in Hebrew. But the king is described as a sun shining forth on a cloudless day.

And the reason the king shines forth like this morning sun is because he rules justly and fears the Lord. So we see in this example a clear connection between the sun and justice, all taking place within the covenantal relationship.

Now, our next example is concerned with justice in the punitive sense. And there's actually three separate occasions where this dynamic is observed. The first is Numbers 25.

[23:36] When Israel falls into idolatry worshipping Baal at Peor during their wilderness wanderings. And Baal is one of the local storm gods. So, this is Numbers 25.

While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor.

And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. So the Lord said to Moses, Take all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the Lord. Kind of interesting.

So in this example, the sun is associated with just punishment. Although the sun is not spoken of metaphorically, the fact that it is mentioned as a specific dimension of divinely ordained justice is suggestive.

The sun isn't just a thing in the sky, it's also a symbol of something. Now our second occasion for punitive judgment comes from 2 Samuel again. This time, this David of Dor...

[24:38] David and Bathsheba. So, after the entire sordid affair with David and Bathsheba is concluded, the Lord sends Nathan to David with an oracle of punishment.

And the conclusion of the Lord's punishment for David reads as follows. This is verses 11 and 12. Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor.

And he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. And in fact, this is precisely what happens. Absalom drives David away, he sets up a tent on the roof, and he lays claim to all of David's concubines.

So as with the example from Numbers 25, this passage demonstrates the thematic or dramatic significance of the sun. David committed his sins in secret.

The Lord punishes David justly in the light of the sun. Now our last example comes from Jeremiah 8, when Jeremiah is prophesying about the valley of slaughter as a response to Judah's idolatry.

[25:47] God's response to their unfaithfulness is physically and poetically brutal. So this is, we'll read three verses, Jeremiah 8, 1 to 3. At that time declares the Lord the bones of the kings of Judah, the bones of its officials, the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, shall be brought out of their tombs, and they shall be spread before the sun, which they have loved and served, which they have gone after, and which they have sought and worshipped.

So here the poetic irony is clearly intentional. Of course it's not just the sun which is bearing witness, the Lord also mentions the moon and the host of heaven, but it exhibits that same pattern that we've already seen in the other examples.

So we can say, in the Old Testament, the sun is used as a dramatic symbol sometimes to underscore appropriate or just punishment. And these examples draw fairly close to what we in English might say, facts coming to light.

So we'll end this section on canonical context with our strongest, and at least for me personally, most memorable example.

And we've actually encountered it quite recently here at St. John's. It's Malachi 4. So here, I think, we are presented with a dual image of the sun. Malachi 4.

[27:07] For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave neither root nor branch.

But for you who fear my name, the sun, S-U-N, of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. So here, we have a dual image of the sun.

When the sun rises on the evildoer, it burns everything like an oven. It sets it ablaze. When the sun rises on those who fear the name of the Lord, it is a cause for joy. The justice of the Lord here is both an occasion for punishment and for healing.

And the word righteousness, tzedakah, is the same root as the word we heard to describe the just king in 2 Samuel 23, tzedik. So, to say son of righteousness is a perfectly appropriate translation as long as we understand that righteousness contains an inward and an outward dimension.

Righteousness is not just concerned with inward holiness, but also outward justice. We could also translate verse 2 as the son of justice shall rise with healing in its wings.

[28:23] Malachi offers a vision of punishment and also a vision of just deliverance. And you might be wondering, why does the sun have wings here? And that's simply because during this period in Mesopotamia, the sun is more often than not depicted as having wings.

It moves through the sky, so why not? Now, the symbol is actually first attested in Egypt as early as the Old Kingdom, so that's over four millennia ago, and it spreads all over the place after that.

And during the period of Hezekiah, actually, they found loads and loads of seals and jarred handles, and they all have the winged sun disk next to the kingdom of Judah symbol.

So it's quite likely that Malachi, in speaking of a son of righteousness, is actually envisioning a future king who will both punish wrongdoers and heal and deliver the oppressed. So to recap where we've been so far in the canonical context.

In the two examples of the ancient Near Eastern prayers, we saw that solar deities in Mesopotamia are generally responsible for providing justice. They do that through the upholding of the law, delivering the oppressed, protecting the traveler, and a frequent metaphor is that of shepherd.

[29:40] And when we compare this, the symbolic use of the sun in the Old Testament, there's some striking similarities, actually. Although the sun is not responsible for justice, the sun is clearly associated with justice.

It functions as a symbol or a metaphor for justice. We can also observe a few differences. In the Old Testament, the sun is thoroughly demythologized. It's just another object.

It's not a god. The sun is not a judge. The sun is not a shepherd. The sun does not enforce fair business, even while it's associated with these things. So, the third question we're going to address today is, are there ways in which the Old Testament describes the Lord which are suggestive of solar imagery?

Psalm 84.11 says, the Lord God is a sun. And this precise phrase only occurs here in the entire Bible. In the Psalms, God is very often a shield, a rock, a refuge, a fortress, but only once a sun.

And interestingly enough, there are some other contextual clues worth considering. So, we'll do two final examples and then we'll move on to Psalm 84. So, our first example is Deuteronomy 33.

[30:52] This is coming right at the end of Moses' life and he's giving his final blessing to Israel. So, this is the blessing which Moses, the man of God, blessed the people of Israel before his death.

He said, the Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us. He shone forth from Mount Paran. He came from the ten thousands of holy ones with flaming fire at his right hand.

Yes, he loved his people, all his holy ones were in his hand. So, they followed in your steps receiving direction from you when Moses commanded us Allah. Now, God is not explicitly called the sun here but there's a pair of Hebrew verbs here, zarach and yafa, to dawn and to shine that strongly connote solar activity.

And more often than not when these verbs are used in the Hebrew Bible, it's always the sun that's doing the shining or the dawning. And the action in particular which Moses is remembering is the giving of the law on Sinai, which is precisely one of the things that solar deities did in the ancient Near East.

Now, here in Deuteronomy 33, God is not equated with the sun but it does seem that he's being described as something like the sun when he shows up. And, there's actually quite a few examples of this language when you start poking around in the Old Testament.

[32:18] Our second and our final example before we move on to Psalm 84 comes from Psalm 80. It's a beautiful and it's a relatively short psalm so I'm going to read the entire thing. This is Psalm 80.

The superscript is to the choir master according to the lilies a testimony of Asaph. Give ear, O shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock, you who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.

Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up your might and come to save us. Restore us, O God, let your face shine that we may be saved. O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

You have fed them with bread of tears, you give them tears to drink in full measure. You make us an object of contention for our neighbors and our enemies laugh amongst themselves.

Restore us, O God of hosts, let your face shine that we may be saved. You brought a vine out of Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it. It took deep root and filled the land.

[33:22] The mountains were covered with shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the river. Why then have you broken down its walls so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

The boar from the forest ravages it and all that move in the field feed on it. Turn again, O Lord of hosts, look down from heaven and see. Have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, for the son whom you made strong for yourself.

They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down. May they perish at the rebuke of your face. But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself. Then we shall not turn back from you.

Give us life and we will call upon your name. Restore us, O Lord of hosts, let your face shine that we may be saved. So, right away, we can make some clear connections with the themes we've already been discussing.

The psalm opens, Give ear, O shepherd of Israel, you who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth. So again, we have that Hebrew verb yafa, to shine, just like in Deuteronomy 33.

[34:26] And interestingly enough, it's precisely in the context of the Lord being called a shepherd. Now what it means for the Lord to shine upon Israel is then spelled out in the rest of the psalm.

So there's kind of a refrain you might have noticed in verse 3 and in verse 7 and in verse 19. Restore us, O God, let your face shine. Restore us, O God of hosts, let your face shine.

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts, let your face shine. The psalm is a request for deliverance from oppression. And the oppression is described in detail in two of the main stanzas.

Israel has been torn apart. So we can probably date this psalm to the exile. Now the theme of solar deliverance was already in Malachi 4 with the Son of Righteousness.

Two other good examples that we won't dwell on today come from Daniel 9, where Daniel prays for restoration of the sanctuary and asks that the Lord's face shine upon the sanctuary. And Isaiah 60, the final day of deliverance when the Son is no more, but instead the Lord is Israel's everlasting light.

[35:34] So here in Psalm 80, God is addressed as a shepherd of desolate people. And the psalmist entreats God that his face would shine in order that they be saved. So although the most common of metaphors, oh, sorry, we can conclude that although it's not the most common of metaphors, this metaphor of the Son, he is described in solar language on a couple of occasions.

This is just to be explicit, not to equate God with the Son. So with all that taken care of, we're almost ready to tackle Psalm 84.

We'll get there, I promise. A couple words about the location of Psalm 84 within the broader book of Psalms. I think it's interpretively significant.

So the Psalter is divided into five books, perhaps intentionally pattering after the Torah. Now many translations, such as the ESV, which we use here at St. John's, actually lists those book headings in the text.

They're not original to the first manuscripts, but there's good reasons to divide the book of the Psalms up in this way. So Psalm 84 belongs to Book 3. That book begins with Psalm 73 and it ends at Psalm 89.

[36:49] Psalm 73 is often called the Psalm of reorientation. It captures a dynamic that runs through much of the book. There the psalmist confesses that when he saw the prosperity of the wicked, his feet had almost stumbled.

Verses 2 and 3. And the stanza which follows this confession offers an extended description of the wicked and the arrogant who wear pride as a necklace, violence as a robe. And the struggle against injustice constitutes a dominant theme in this smaller collection as well.

Not just as something which is experienced but something which is a source of temptation. And the antidote to this temptation comes in 73, 16 and 17.

When I pondered in order to understand the life of the wicked, it was a wearisome burden in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of the Lord. Then I discerned the ends of those who reject God.

Now the Lord's sanctuary appears many, many more times in Book 3. We have Psalm 74 twice, Psalm 78, Psalm 79, Psalm 87, and other synonyms as well.

[38:01] So God's dwelling place, his courts, his house, Zion. In the main, these references to sanctuary are a complex nexus of the experience of loss, the loss of the temple.

You don't necessarily value something until it's gone. And in fact, the loss of sanctuary and nationhood are in all likelihood the theme-shaping circumstances of this third book in the Book of Psalms.

Psalm 74, for example. There we read, the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary. And the book nearly ends with a somber lament of Psalm 88.

The only companion who is my confidant is darkness. Psalm 89 asks, Lord, where are your former acts of loving kindness? You swore an oath to David in your faithfulness. So the emotional timber of this Book of the Psalms communicates that we have a collection of prayers from a community in crisis.

To quote one biblical scholar, the effect of the final form is to suggest that the book has been decisively shaped by the experience of exile and dispersion. And this catastrophic event of judgment in turn leads to a poignant re-engagement with the symbols that lay at the heart of Israel's self-understanding as the people of God.

[39:19] So into this context, loss of sanctuary, Psalm 84 speaks. So this is Psalm 84. Psalm 84.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you and whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of Baca, 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. I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

For the Lord is a sun and a shield. The Lord bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk up rightly. O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you.

[40:43] So, with all of that background work done, let's tackle Psalm 84. Now, my understanding of the psalm is that we have four stanzas here.

Verses 1 to 3, verses 4 to 8, verses 9 and 10, and 11 and 12. And if you've got a Bible handy, you can open it up. It'll kind of help you track. If not, that's okay. So, each stanza is also grouped around a central idea.

Verses 1 to 3 express a yearning for God's temple. Verses 4 to 8, imagine a pilgrimage to that temple. Verses 9 and 10 are a prayer offered by the pilgrim in the temple.

And verses 11 and 12 are a benediction, perhaps as the pilgrim leaves the temple. So, there's this beautiful dynamic here. The psalmist opens with a confident declaration, expressing joyful admiration for the place where God dwells.

And this develops a theme that we see through the entire psalm, which is really central to Book 3 of this altar, the house of the Lord. Now, memory of the pilgrimage during the exilic period would have been a source of hopeful longing.

[41:55] And if we're correct in arguing that Book 3 came together during the exile when the temple was in ruins, then the psalmist is piously expressing a remarkable faith. How lovely is your dwelling place?

The poem shifts from an objective declaration to a subjective experience in verse 2. The very essence of the psalmist's being desires to be in the temple courtyard. And within that moment of desire, heart and flesh sing joyfully to God.

Then we get a beautiful image in verse 3. Now, setting aside the cultic associations with birds, the image of a sparrow facing danger is a well-established image in the Old Testament.

And it's often in reference to Israel. Psalm 11.1 gives us the image of a bird that is a child fleeing from the wicked, taking refuge in the Lord.

And birds are often those for whom the Lord provides. Psalm 50, Psalm 104. So here we see a sparrow who finds a home, implying that the sparrow was previously homeless, searching for a place to set her young.

[43:10] So the bird is a metaphor for the displaced nation of Israel, the community of faith which will find a house, a place where she can set her young. And the repetition of the phrase Lord of hosts marks the end of the first stanza where God is described as the king.

I think that would have been especially important to emphasize when there was no king. Now the second stanza describes the pilgrimage. We have two wisdom sayings.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you and blessed are those whose hearts are on pilgrimage. Now a life of blessing is a central concern in wisdom literature.

We've encountered that a lot in the Proverbs these days. Now one implicit reason that dwelling in the Lord's house is a source of blessing has already been captured. It's a place of refuge for the weak and defenseless.

But the psalmist broadens that experience of blessing with the second line in verse 4. Those dwelling in God's house will continually praise him. The blessing of being in God's house results in continual praise.

[44:22] And the second wisdom saying is a bit more difficult. In Hebrew we would translate it woodenly as blessed are those whose strength is in you and whose heart are highways.

Kind of a strange phrase. Now the ESV supplies the word Zion. Blessed are those whose strength is in you and whose heart are the highways to Zion. And that's an interpretively responsible choice.

Since the psalmist is guiding us towards an imagined landscape of pilgrimage. And the goal of pilgrimage in verse 4 to dwell in the house of the Lord is realized in verse 7.

The pilgrim appears before God in Zion. So to speak of crossing highways in the heart is perhaps to say that those who take strength in the Lord are perpetually on pilgrimage.

Their hearts are continuously yearning. Such a person is blessed not only when they are able to dwell in the house of the Lord but also because he is their strength.

[45:27] From the perspective of exile this is especially true since from such a vantage point it would only be possible to take a journey in the heart. And verses 4 and 5 also complement each other through their parallel structure.

reflecting both interior and exterior aspects of the life of faith. Blessing is both an interior disposition we take our strength in the Lord and it's also an exterior disposition we praise him continuously.

Moreover those whose strength is in the Lord verse 5 shall go from strength to strength. So in this third stanza we see that true pilgrimage is that which issues out of reliance upon the Lord.

He is the one who makes such a travel even possible. Now there's one small translational note that we need to make in verse 6. So as we have it in the Hebrew text we can either see the pilgrim passing through the valley of Balsam or the valley of Baca.

And there's no reason to think that he'd be passing through a valley of Balsam that's a little bit strange. And the place Baca isn't attested anywhere else. So sometimes and I would favor this reading of the text some commentaries suggest that we change the vowel pointing to read valley of weeping because there's no significance to Balsam or to Baca as far as we know.

[47:01] And this fits well with our hypothesis that we're dealing with an exilic psalm. There would have been a great deal of weeping. So those who go through the valley of weeping they make it a place of springs because their strength is in the Lord.

So then the psalm shifts abruptly. We were on the pilgrim way and suddenly we get a direct request to God. Now the content of the prayer is maybe a bit unexpected.

The psalmist says, Behold our shield, O God, look on the face of your anointed. So the psalmist is praying for the king. And there's been no talk of the king in the psalm and this is especially unexpected if we're contending that we have an exilic psalm here.

But an intriguing interpretation is to take the third stanza as a prayer offered to God from a place where pilgrimage is not a possibility. Perhaps we are even among the tents of the wicked.

Verse 10. Under this interpretation, the closing of the stanza with the prayer takes on the colors of lament.

[48:16] psalm 84 then closes with a confident benediction, expressing an unwavering trust in the Lord of hosts.

Now the initial scene of the psalm, from verses 1 to 10, was of a temporal pilgrimage, real or imagined, those on the way. But the poem finishes by opening into a wider affirmation of life lived in the service of the Lord.

Kingship and temple worship were two of the central symbols in Israel's religious life. But here in the benediction, they fade into the background. For the Lord God is a sun and a shield, the Lord bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does the Lord withhold. O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you. There's a constant refrain, leaning on the Lord. In verse 8, the anointed was called a shield.

And it's fairly typical to call a king a shield. Since he was responsible for the military. But now the psalmist proclaims that it is actually the Lord who is a shield, and not only the Lord as shield, but the Lord as sun.

[49:26] So here we are at verse 11. Having come this far, I'd say we're now well placed to consider some of the interpretations that this potent solar metaphor about God might mean.

One of the characteristics of metaphor, and particularly striking metaphors, is that we can have a multiplicity of interpretations which all complement each other.

In theory, the solar metaphor in verse 11 could entail many of the associations which we've already encountered. It's conceivable, and perhaps even appropriate, that the rich imagery of the phrase, the Lord God is a sun, unfolds in many directions.

Now, many modern commentaries take the sun as a symbol of life-giving power and providence, as I mentioned at the start of the lecture. Now, we can't rule this interpretation out definitively, but it does lack specificity for the original context, so it's an interpretation which is less apt.

Additionally, this metaphor has a second metaphor, the shield, and if we are to say that God is the source of life, then why mention shielding, particularly because the sun and the shield are two metaphors often used of kings.

[50:54] If the king is a sun and a shield, it is because he dimly reflects the Lord who is the true sun and shield. Now, the solar deities Shamash and Ishtanu are always spoken of in terms of justice and deliverance, never in terms of their providence.

When the sun appears as a symbol in the Old Testament, it also carries connotations of justice, very rarely as providence. And when the Lord shines like the sun, it's frequently within the context of deliverance and restoration, justice and action.

So since Psalm 84 occurs within the locus of pilgrimage, the Lord's sun-like behavior might entail safe travels. prayer is and that understanding fits well with the closing promise that the Lord will not withhold good for those walking in honest devotion.

But the human focus of the prayer in the third stanza is on the anointed, the king. Verse 9 says, look to our shield. And the king was described as a mourning sun in 2 Samuel 23, whose just rain issues forth from fear of the Lord.

Lord. We also saw in the prophets, so Isaiah 60, Daniel 9, Malachi 4, the image of the sun as deliverance takes on the specific dimension of restoration, deliverance from exile.

[52:16] Our interpretation of Psalm 84 already hinted at this, but there's a possibility that the psalmist is yearning for the return of the king and the temple. So in the final analysis although there are multiple potential associations which stem from the basic understanding that the sun is a symbol of justice, I would say it's most clear that God here is being described as the sun because he's a deliverer and a restorer.

Blessed is the one who trusts in him. So with all of that offered, we have a little bit of time for some questions. So fire away.

How much do you know about Hebrew? Can you speak Hebrew and stuff like that? Not modern Hebrew because modern and biblical Hebrew are about as related as the old English of Beowulf is related to modern English.

So there's vocabulary is obviously much different and syntax has changed a lot. I'm trying to learn a little bit of modern Hebrew because I thought it would be kind of fun. but I can only read in biblical Hebrew which is...

Your knowledge of Greek is pretty good too, right? Korne Greek, yes. Wow. Any questions about the content of the lecture perhaps? Yes?

[53:48] Give us your ultimate theological meditation. I hope to briefly have creation is far... We live under the sun.

Yes. God created this to be an elemental fact meaning for us. So creation and redemption are...

How do you put this together? I know that's it. Oh, I see. But you must have some final intuition, spiritual intuition about this. God creates the sun. Yeah.

I guess then we're sort of touching on natural theology maybe. Yeah, I think sort of the fundamental human experiences which we all have and which sort of came out fairly clearly during our survey would seem to suggest that God gave the sun for particular reasons.

But ultimately I would say all metaphors need to be fulfilled in Christ.

[55:18] And then I would be thinking about the ending of Revelation when the Lamb returns and he's like the sun. and I guess again there's one of the fun and perhaps frustrating issues with symbols is when you see all the things they can represent the categories kind of blend out and at the end of the day drawing a sharp line between creation and providence and justice is fairly difficult to do.

But ultimately we would find all of those things in God of course. Does that answer your I'm not quite sure. I kept thinking of the transfiguration as you spoke.

Oh yeah that's another interesting connection there too. Yeah. That was a good response thank you. It's a broad thing.

Yeah the transfiguration is another interesting connection. It was my biggest well whenever one does a thesis there are always regrets I suppose. But I really wanted to keep pressing on into the New Testament with my canonical survey but I had to I'm already way over the word limit with my current draft so I left the part anything where Jesus is portrayed as the sun.

Yes Sheila. Well you're never going to insult me by giving a historical context to whatever you're saying about the Bible because I think we often have a tendency to just focus on a text and not look at that.

[57:14] the culture in which the text was written or the group that it was intended for. Hittites are a mysterious group because they kind of disappeared.

Yeah they did. And yet they've left us their capital city which groups of archaeologists have I think for at least 30 maybe 50 years been working on up near Ankara there.

But the biblical reference that I associate with Hittites is that Abraham coming through their territory sort of with his flocks and his relatives and so on wanted to give a chunk of that away to a troublesome relative whose name escapes me and it was a Hittite document that he used to do that relating to what you said about business practice and their development there.

but Abraham seems to have been untouched by any of this and maybe being herder and following the grass or whatever was in his favor that way because he kept moving and the establishment of his relationship with God and his following God in the development of a new faith really would necessitate not getting too involved with the ones that surrounded him.

Yeah. Yeah it's quite I guess one thing that I found very striking when I was reading all these ancient Near Eastern prayers and hymns was both how there are so the language of the Old Testament is very similar to the language of the ancient Near East but what they mean to say with that language is night and day.

[59:07] So it was almost depressing at times to read all these pagan hymns and there's just so much darkness and despair in them and yet at the same time we see that's the cultural background Israel grew out of where they were chosen as the people of God.

So in that sense there's continuity but at the same time the revelation of Yahweh just breaks through and absolutely obliterates those world views.

So it is quite remarkable how Abraham is not anything like the people around him. And not influenced by those in any way which is really great.

Yeah. Yeah. Thanks for that comment. Yes. Lenore. I was just thinking and Ed Ferguson spoke on this and a retreat I was at in September I think it was.

Anyway about the exile. Sometimes we think the exile I mean it was awful they were taken off into exile a lot of them were dispersed never to be seen again but really God preserved his people through that time.

[60:18] You know he had his faithful remnant and people were writing songs and you know sitting down by the rivers of Babylon and weeping when they remembered Zion and things like that and a lot of the remnant God was at work in them preserving them and during that time a lot of the if I understand correctly the Jewish liturgy the synagogues a lot of that was set up and some of that is still used to this day really and a lot of it was developed during the exile.

that's my impression anyway so there might have been darkness around them but God was there preserving them. Yeah and I think you see that very clearly in Psalm 84 like if it's true that it was composed during a period of darkness it's a remarkably joyful and hopeful hymn it's just yeah it's very beautiful and striking in that sense.

You know with the Holy Spirit I've been reading my commentary about the Holy Spirit the creation the presence of the Holy Spirit and you know you go into a synagogue there's an atmosphere there would that possibly be the Holy Spirit and all the Jews they read that they pray the Psalms the Jewish prayer book it starts the you read it back front stuff like that but how do Jews view today in the Judaism sun and moon and shield is that any revelance you find?

hmm that's an interesting question I did not do any research in particular on modern or say medieval Jewish understandings of the sun in Kabbalah there is some sun symbolism and I think in many of the synagogues from the late Roman period there are there's often a fair bit of syncretism with Apollo the Roman sun god but that's all that I off the top of my head can recall and I don't know what the Jews today think about the sun yeah the ancient world is quite complex it's interesting to try and unravel some of the threads yes yes hi thank you for this talk and I just have a comment

I found looking back into the history and every nation every country the people usually worship the creation instead of worship the creator not this history of modern things yeah yeah yeah the more things change the more they stay the same the human heart is always yeah the human heart it's true yeah certainly not yes so you mentioned that the many people say that these are maybe boys written during the exile right but just into it it seems much more natural to imagine it being proposed when the temple was still in existence right so that's that's a possibility I didn't directly touch on but yes it's true and there's I suppose there's maybe two ways one could go about it the first would be to say it very well might have been composed during the monarchy and then it was intentionally brought into the third collection during the exile so there's kind of maybe two original historical contexts there's the first time it was composed when it would have very naturally been used when pilgrimage was actually happening and then when pilgrimage is no longer happening and the exiles are sort of grasping at straws to make sense of God's justice they use this psalm and its position in the psalter as it stands now rose out of the exilic experience so I would say

[64:53] I think your fundamental observation is correct but I would still contend that the Jewish community intentionally chose that psalm for the exile experience so