

A Journey To Zion

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[0 : 00] Psalms, Psalm 84, and I'm just going to bring out some points from the whole stretch of the psalm. How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts.

Now it's obvious as you read through the psalm that it's one of those pilgrimage psalms. It's one of those psalms that speaks about a journey to Zion, a journey to the temple, because as we'll see, he is away from the temple.

The psalmist is lamenting the fact that he's not in God's house or near God's house and wants to know again of the benefit of being in the Lord's house.

It doesn't tell us where he is or how long he's been away, but he does obviously have a longing to be back in the courts of the Lord, as he says in verse 2.

And you can see too that three times, at least through the psalm, you have the word blessed. And in some ways you could say that blessed, as you find in verses 4 and 5 and 12, the psalm is in a sense a meditation on the meaning of blessed and how the whole concept of being blessed applies to God's people.

[1 : 14] One of the beautiful things about the psalm, and it is such a comforting thought, is that blessedness is not affected by whatever conditions we may find ourselves in.

Because the psalm takes us through different circumstances and different conditions, even the fact that he's there and then in a place of longing, and where he talks to later, as we'll see, to the valley of Boker, the difficulties of the journey, the challenges of the journey, and then reaching journey's end, throughout all of these varied experiences, his blessedness remains in place.

God has blessed him. Nothing can alter that. And all the way through, he's carrying the blessedness that belongs to him, of which he speaks through each and all of these circumstances. It remains intact for the whole of his journey. And isn't that a comforting and reassuring thought for yourself tonight as a Christian? That however things change in your experience or in the conditions of your life from day to day, none of that affects your blessedness.

You are as blessed after God has blessed you. You are as blessed in times of adversity and temptation and difficulty as you are in times of comfort and joy.

[2 : 30] The blessedness is not conditional upon the outward circumstances. The blessedness continues right through every instance of life.

And that's, of course, what God demonstrated way back in the Old Testament days there, further back in the days of Balaam coming to try and curse the Lord's people in the book of Numbers, chapters 23, 24, as you read through that, that Balak, the king of Moab, had hired him to come and curse these people of God.

He took him up to a mountain, as you remember, and sought to curse them from there. And God came and put a word in his mouth. And instead of uttering curses against the people of God, he pronounced some of the most beautiful blessings from God upon these people.

And in pronouncing that, one of the things he said more than once was, how can I curse whom God has not cursed? And how can I bless whom God has not blessed?

If tonight your life is blessed, and as a Christian your life is blessed, nothing is going to be able to curse you. Nothing is going to alter that blessedness that God has actually laid upon you or taken you into.

[3 : 47] Now, there are three points, just briefly, that we can divide the psalm into. First of all, verses 1 to 4, and also verse 10, you find that there is what you might call the element of pining.

He's pining for the house of the Lord. He has a longing in his heart. Secondly, verses 5 to 7 speaks about pilgrimage. And then, finally, verses 11 to 12 speak about plenty, the plenteousness that God has for his people, as the one who is their son and their shield, bestowing favour and honour.

No good thing does he withhold the plenteousness of goodness, as God showers them with good things. So, pining, pilgrimage, and plenty.

And the first verses, 1 to 4, here he is saying, how lovely is your dwelling place. He's thinking about the dwelling place of God, the temple of God. And then he says, my soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord.

And one of the things that strikes you all the way through that, especially in the beginning, how lovely is your dwelling place. As he pines for the house of God, his mind is caught up with the beauty of that.

[5 : 06] And with the beauty of the house of God, because of God's own beauty. Because that's what you find right throughout, where God makes his presence, that makes a place or a person beautiful.

You find that in Psalm 27, for example. When you think of how the same reference there is to the temple or the house of God, and the psalmist there in 27, the Lord is my light and my salvation. This is David this time, how that gives him encouragement and strength. But then in verse 4, one thing I have asked of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

Why? To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, to inquire in his temple. See what comes through to us from the word of God. From the study of the word of God, from our meditation on the word of God. What comes through to us as God impresses us with his word in our hearts is the beauty of the Lord. Every single thing that has beauty about it in this world.

[6 : 13] And let's face it, this is still a world that's marred by sin, waiting for the day of its deliverance at the end of the world and the reconstitution into the new heavens and the new earth, where righteousness dwells.

Nevertheless, all around you, you have beauty. You have beauty in terms of your own human being. The beauty of your mind. The beauty in which God has put you together with the different faculties that you have.

Where does that beauty come from? Where does the beauty of salvation come from? Where does the beauty of redemption in Christ come from? Where does the beauty of your adoption come from? The fact that you've been made and brought into the family of God and have become a child of God.

The beauty of that position and that relationship with God is from him. Everything is derived that is beautiful is derived from his beauty.

God places his own beauty. The beauty of his holiness. The beauty of his life. The life that he gives to us. He impresses us and puts that upon us.

[7 : 21] And so you find the same in verse 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 dwell in the tents of wickedness.

In other words, he's really saying the least position in the house of God is of infinitely more beauty than the highest position in the world. To dwell in the tents of wickedness.

To have that dwelling place instead of the dwelling place of being in the house of the Lord. There is no comparison. Tonight you are in a beautiful situation.

Of course, the temple of the Lord, house of the Lord, is more than this building. The concept of God's dwelling place moves as we come into the New Testament. It being now the church of God, the people of God.

That's where he dwells. That's where he's placed his name. That's the place he makes beautiful for his own presence and by his own presence.

[8 : 23] And you know, as we come to another Lord's day and another Lord's supper, God willing. One of the things that we ought to seek from God as we come once again to take communion is that the Lord would bless his word to us and by his spirit enable us once again just to dwell upon the beauty of the Lord.

To dwell upon what these elements of bread and of wine represent. That this is the beauty of Christ. Christ's own death, which is such a cursed death.

And the ugliness of death. And the ugliness of bearing the punishment of God. And yet, nevertheless, it is, in the other sense, the most beautiful place in the world.

Because that is where the beauty of righteousness shines. The beauty of God's love as it penetrates the darkness of Calvary. And as you look at those things in emblem in the Lord's supper, it should be for us a conveying of that sense of beauty.

How beautiful is our salvation. How beautiful is our saviour. How beautiful is that relationship to him in which we have communion with God.

[9 : 40] How beautiful is the prospect in the hope that he's given us of eternal life with him in heaven. Every single aspect of our relationship with God has beauty in some way attached to it.

And we can say how lovely, how beautiful is your dwelling place, O Lord. And you know that word lovely, it is beautiful.

It does mean beautiful. But it also conveys with it a sense of beloved, of being valued. How beloved is your dwelling place?

How valued is your dwelling place? How precious to me is the fact that you dwell, Lord, in my heart. That you've chosen this as your dwelling place. It's something that I prize, something that I value.

Of course, that carries you into what the Bible many ways presents as, the lament of God's people when they're not as aware as they once were of being near to God.

[10 : 44] When they lament the fact that they have caused perhaps some distance between themselves and God by disobedience, by something other that they know has caused that God's face has, to an extent, been hidden from them.

They don't have the same comfort they used to have. They don't have the same sense of nearness to God. And they can say with the psalmist, Lord, my soul longs, faints. I want this back.

I want to have that relationship restored to the way that I enjoyed you as I used to. But, you know, tonight, if you are in that situation where you say, I'm not as close to the Lord as I used to be.

I'm not as close to the Lord as I've been recently. And I lament the fact that that's the case. And I'd like to have it restored. If that is the case, don't let that keep you back from the Lord's table.

Don't let it keep you from coming to take communion. Because, after all, what could be better for you than to use a means of grace like the Lord's Supper, by which the Lord channels grace into our lives?

[11 : 53] What could be better for you than to come and avail yourself once again of it, asking that the Lord would restore your soul, would actually bring back to you that sense of his nearness, if you've lost that to some extent.

So, this is his desire. The soul is longing. He's crying out for the courts of the Lord. And these words in verse 2, my heart and flesh sing for joy.

I think the old translation in that instance is probably better. It's crying out to the living God. And it's not necessarily devoid of joy, but the prominent element, I think, in his longing and his pining for the house of God, he has that pain in his heart.

And he is crying out for the Lord. This is really serious to him. This is something he really wants to know, and God's answer to God answering his prayer and his longing.

My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord. She is envious at the sparrow and the swallow, who have found a place to nest at your altars, O Lord of hosts.

[13 : 10] He's really saying, Lord, here I am, and I'm conscious I'm not at your house. I'm not where I would desire to be. At the moment, I'm distanced from your altars, from your temple, and I envy these very little birds that have a place in your temple.

If only I were as one of them to actually be at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.

And so that's the blessed state he speaks of. Blessed are those, verse 4, who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise. Well, is this not our desire tonight?

However much we've known the Lord in the past up to this moment, whether we've been in this pilgrimage a long time or a short time, that's not really the issue. The issue is that tonight we want to see God spiritually with our longing eyes.

We want to come to this communion on the Lord's day, praying that the Lord would reveal himself to us through his word and through the elements of the Lord's Supper. And that once again, we would gaze upon his beauty.

[14 : 23] And that he would reinforce to our longing souls the fact that he is our God, that we are his people, that he's taken us as his people, that we are, in other words, blessed.

Blessed by him. Because he speaks of him here as, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. By that he shows that this Lord, this God, has no rivals.

None can take his place. None can dethrone him. More than that, the Psalms very often are polemic. That's to say they're directed against idolatry and against the kind of religions that Israel had around her at all times.

And so in the Psalms, you'll find so much of an emphasis on God, their God being the true God, the only God, the living God, the creator God, the sovereign God, the saving God, the covenant God. All of that is a polemic against those idols and these idolaters around them. And really these gods in Psalm 115, they're dead.

[15:35] They're made by human hands. They have certain shapes. They've even got human form. They have eyes. They have ears. They have mouths, but they can't hear. They can't speak. Because they're dead, worthless idols.

But your God is this God. And as this God is your God, so you'll love to have that made known to the world in which you live.

And by coming to once again take communion, and even by being here tonight, you have demonstrated and you're demonstrating that this God is your God, that you're not living for the gods of this world.

That whatever shape the gods of this world take, they are varied and they are many. As we heard in the Lord's Day from Kalmurda, if I remember rightly, that the idolatry of our age is not confined to things that people make with their hands.

There's all kinds of ideologies and philosophies and lifestyles and many things related to that that are just idolatrous. Man worshipping himself and his own mind and his own so-called ability and putting God aside.

[16:47] But this is your God. Blessed are those whose God is this God. At your altar, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.

And isn't it marvellous how that little word, my, just clinches that argument for us, doesn't it? He's not just God. He's not just God in terms of being the King and the Sovereign Lord of the universe. The psalmist is here saying, I'm away from where I would long to be, where I'm longing to be back at. My soul is longing for the courts of the Lord. At your altar, my King and my God.

Reminds you, doesn't it, of the great words you find in John's Gospel when Jesus came to reveal himself to Thomas? Thomas not having been there a week before when he revealed himself as the risen Christ to the disciples.

And of course, he knew of Thomas' objection and the words that Thomas had spoken, even though Jesus wasn't physically present. We invited Thomas specifically. And what a marvellous thing that is as well, that the Lord would make the effort, if we can put it that way, and would take such concern to present himself to that one disciple who had been missing from the previous gathering, just to reveal himself to him this time.

[18:16] And after Thomas had come with conviction to realise who this was, that this was the risen Christ, how did he respond? My Lord and my God.

My Lord and my God. What a great confession. One of the greatest confessions in the Bible, combining as it did the personal attachment of Thomas to Jesus and Jesus to him, but also Jesus himself being both Lord and God.

So there's pining, pining for the house of the Lord, the presence of God, secondly, there's pilgrimage from verse five. Blessed are those whose strength is in you and 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. They go from strength to strength. Each one appears before God in Zion.

Now the journey to Zion, or back to the temple, wherever he was situated this time, was obviously going to be through difficult terrain, valley of Beka, generally is interpreted by commentators as a place of dryness.

[19:37] Difficult to be precise, but the meaning of the word Beka itself, but certainly it was a desert place, a place of dryness, very arid place, a place for which you needed strength to actually walk through it and come out the other side.

And he's saying here that he requires that strength so that they will go and he will go from strength to strength with those who are traveling. It involves a tough journey.

It's the journey of life. It's the journey on which you and I are set as pilgrims heading towards Zion because that road takes you, as you very well know, through difficult, challenging territory.

You're going to meet with enemies that will frighten you. You're going to meet with failures on your own part and mine. You're going to meet with temptations to some of which you will yield to, and I too.

There's so much you're going to meet with that really in themselves are designed to put you off, to make you turn back. You're going to meet with Satan, especially different forms and different ways in which he has access to our lives.

[20 : 49] So as to try and intimidate us, you're going to meet with the ways of the world, with the hostility of those enemies of Christ. So many ways in which the path, the pilgrimage, is a really testing one, one of difficulty for which you and I need, the strength that God gives.

That's why he's saying in verse 5, blessed are those whose strength is in you. In other words, he's saying, blessed are those for whom you are the strength.

You are the one who gives them the strength for the journey. And really that's very much in line with what the apostle wrote. You remember to the Corinthians in the second letter to the Corinthians where he spoke about the difficulties that he himself was facing.

But then as he came to chapter 12, as you read it in chapter 12, the experiences he spoke of there, the thorn in the flesh that was given him, to buffet him, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.

[22 : 03] Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. He's saying that I am content. For the sake of Christ, I'm content with weaknesses, and so on.

He knew that as he depended upon Christ, as he depended on the grace of God that was promised him, he knew that the strength he needed was given to him.

The strength to actually meet those challenges that he speaks of in this chapter, in these verses. And the word he uses there for content.

For the sake of Christ, I am content with weaknesses, insults. It's the very same word that's actually used for God's, the Father's words about Jesus.

[23 : 07] This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased. That word in Greek for well pleased, content, is exactly the word that Paul uses there in 2 Corinthians chapter 12.

I am well pleased to be like this. I am content that this is my lot, that I know whatever circumstances I have, my blessedness will not run out, and it will not be taken from me.

My status will not change. The grace of God will not fail me. It is sufficient for me. Whatever we're afraid of, and we're afraid of many things, whatever we're afraid of must never deflect our minds and our conviction that the grace of God is not sufficient for us.

Many people have fears about coming to meet with the elders, for example, to come to take communion for the first time. And however much we do try and emphasize and do again emphasize, this is not to be seen as a formidable challenge.

It's not there to prove how much you don't know or do know. It's actually there to be very much a stepping stone, very much to do with an encouraging step for you to take in terms of coming to the Lord's table for the first time.

[24 : 36] In other words, the challenge of that, think of it in the words of Paul, I am therefore content. I am therefore pleased that there's such a thing for me that I can take this step, even if it's a challenge, because then the power of Christ will rest upon me and the grace that's promised me will be my experience.

So he has the strength even in the times of testing, but notice how he's saying as they go through the valley of Beka, they make it a place of springs.

And I think the imagery that you've got there is a very precious one. He's not saying as they go through the valley of Beka, the rain comes down. He does mention that in the end of verse 6, but the first thing he says here is they make it.

These pilgrims make the valley of Beka. They make it a place of wells. In other words, they have to actually use means by which to dig up the water for themselves.

The valley of Beka is arid on top. It's a desert. There's nothing to be seen on the surface, but when you dig down deep enough, you'll come across water and you can actually get a refreshing drink. [25 : 48] That's the image that you've got here. And that image follows you into the Christian's experience as well. Because there are circumstances in your life, and if we can put it in the language of the psalm, you have to dig a blessing out of it.

It takes effort on our part. We can't bless ourselves. We cannot earn the blessing of God, but God places us in situations of distress, sometimes of anguish, sometimes of whatever difficulties they may be.

And he's saying to us from this psalm, however difficult it is, whatever kind of difficulty it is, you have to dig down. You have to search through it and find the hand of God and find the water that God has provided for his people throughout the journey.

They make it a place of springs, a place of a well. So if you're facing tonight a specific difficulty, even if you find it's one that you may feel nobody else can actually help you with or understand, maybe different to what anybody else may be going through, here is the Lord encouraging you, dig into it in such a way as you pray to me, you pray for me, you pray that I will actually make myself known to you, that I will bless this to you, that you will find that it is in fact by my blessing and coming to see me in it a place of wells, a place of real blessing to your soul.

And that's why he's saying here the early rain also covers it with pools, well that's in addition to needing, to blessing, to digging for the blessings, God graciously sometimes just comes with a shout of blessing even if you haven't done much digging at all because he's God and because he's kind.

[27 : 57] He comes with unexpected blessings. He showers down blessings upon us. And so verse 7, they go from strength to strength each one appears before God in Zion.

And you have something quite wonderful again in this. You've got both an emphasis on the company of God's pilgrims and each individual appearing before God in Zion.

And what a benefit it is for us, friends, especially when the testing comes to us and the going is tough and the pilgrimage really is through very difficult territory spiritually. What a blessing it is to know that you're not on your own, that you're part of a company, that you belong to a fellowship, that you're traveling together with others who are pilgrims on the same journey, who maybe have been through similar circumstances before and can help you through it, but even not, if not, they're there for your support.

They go from strength to strength and as we dig for blessings, let's make sure that we're looking out for those that we can help and let's make sure that we're willing to receive the help we need whenever others offer it to us.

We are there for each other. We are there as fellow pilgrims. We are there sharing the journey. We are there so that in sharing the journey we may go from strength to strength step by step, strengthening each other until we come to appear before God and sign until we reach home, until we reach the temple above, the heavenly Zion.

[29 : 41] But you notice how it's changed from they go to from strength to strength to each one appears before God and sign. None is left out. Now this life may for some Christians, many indeed be a very lonely journey.

They may find difficulties sharing things with others. They know they belong to the company of God's people. It doesn't necessarily mean that it's easy for them to divulge their needs to others or their thoughts.

But whatever experiences we have and whatever the company needs to go through, each one appears. He's not going to leave you in the desert.

He's not going to leave you in the valley of Baca. He's not going to take away his strength for the latter part of the journey or for the section or for the section you're going through just now.

Each one appears before God in Zion. Be thankful tonight for that emphasis on individuality set in the context of the corporateness of God's people together.

[30 : 55] Because that's what we have to always hold on to. I'm not alone. And even though I'm part of a crowd, I'm not lost in the crowd. I belong to the company of those pilgrims that are traveling home.

Pining, pilgrimage, and then plenty. Because from verse 11, he speaks here about the Lord God is a sun and shield. The Lord bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. So it's really in these two verses what God is and what God does. He is a sun and he's a shield.

He gives light and he gives protection at the same time. That's the God who takes his people through this pilgrimage until they appear in his presence. To counter all the fears that we may have. Here is God saying, if you need light, then I've got light for you. If you need strength, I've got the strength you need. If you need protection as a shield, I am your shield and I am your exceeding great reward, as he said to Abraham.

[32 : 08] I will look after you. I will protect you. I will be your defense. And also, he gives favor and honor the Lord bestows.

And again, the old translation has, he bestows grace and glory. There's nothing wrong with putting it as favor and honor, but somehow, especially for those of us of an older disposition, perhaps we might prefer these words.

He gives grace, which is, of course, favor and honor, which is really ultimately glory. Isn't it whichever translation we choose, it really amounts pretty much to the same thing.

He gives grace and he gives glory. He gives you his favor. He bestows that upon you and he gives you his honor. He honors you.

He gives you glory. That's really a description of a Christian. What am I as a Christian? What are you as a Christian? What are we together as Christians?

[33 : 17] We have people on whom God has bestowed grace and glory, favor and honor. That's our portion.

And that's why when every Lord's supper opportunity comes around, we have to respond to the fact of what this is saying to us.

The blessing, the blessed people, we have to respond by saying, well, how can I not go and take communion? When God is all of this to me, when this is the fact of what he has done and is doing, how can I possibly think of anything less than taking the cup and taking the bread and doing this in remembrance of him?

Really similar isn't it? Romans chapter 8 and verse 28. It says there in verse 12 of the psalm, O God of hosts, Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you.

As Romans 8, 28 puts it, blessed indeed, where Romans says that as Paul saw the wonder of being in Christ, the wonder of the blessings of Christ, that all of the things that he had mentioned there actually in verse 28, just give me a minute to look it up, the surrounding verses as well, where he said that the spirit helping them in their infirmities and the calling of God, the justifying of God, what shall we then say to these things?

[34 : 57] If God is for us, who can be against us? And we know in verse 28, we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good.

Just like the psalm has said, he will give grace grace and glory. No good thing will he withhold because all things work together for good to the Lord's people.

May he bless these thoughts on his word. Let's sing in his praise in Psalm let's pinch enrage for good Schluss into the truth after you should tell he to UN do the us and