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# The Pilgrim Psalm

## Psalm 84

### Introduction

Good evening. As most of you will probably readily realize, I have not had the opportunity to open the Word to you from this pulpit before. And you will probably also guess that this opportunity, although I am very happy for it, is somewhat anxiety producing for me. So I'll ask you at the outset to try and filter out the occasional wavers in voice, misuse of words, or becoming lost in my notes, and focus on what the Word has to say to us as we seek to understand it better and apply it to our lives and hearts.

In spite of my anxiety, however, I am quite happy to have this opportunity to share with you. This is not because I think I have something worthwhile to say, or because I personally benefited from the study involved in preparing for speaking this evening, although these things are true. It is because I know that the that through the Word of God we are brought nearer to an understanding of who God is, who we ourselves are, and what His redemptive plan is for our lives. Through the Spirit-enabled hearing and the grace-empowered obeying of the Word, we as believers are transformed and given grace. Therefore, it is with delight and confidence that I invite you to turn to Psalm 84, knowing that as we read these words, we read the very words of God, the almighty Creator of the universe and Redeemer of our souls.

Read Psalm 84

So, as you can immediately see, both from the title of this message and the reading of the passage, this Psalm has something do with pilgrimage. A pilgrim, as you know is one who journeys through a foreign land. A "pilgrimage", then, is the making of a purposeful journey through an unfamiliar land.

We must remember that Psalm 84 was penned (or spoken) by a human hand that truly existed in history. The words are inerrant and God inspired, but nonetheless, they are not words that are disembodied – they do not come to us in a vacuum from a ghostly apparition that never truly existed. God is speaking *to* and *through* the human condition. In Psalm 84 it is as if we have placed our ear up to the thin wall of an Old Testament believer's prayer closet and we hear him here on his knees before God. We are able to hear the murmurings, the longings, the desires of the Old Testament believer's heart while on pilgrimage. Psalm 84 is the *prayer-song* of the Pilgrim.

After considering the context of this Psalm, we will spend some time gaining simply an understanding of the text, and then we will conclude with several observations.

In understanding any text in the Scripture, we, in efforts to get the meaning right, are obligated to consider the context. Understanding the context, however, is not a unidimensional wink at the verses before and after the particular text we are interested in, but rather an understanding of context on multiple levels. That is to say we are not only concerned with the immediate verses surrounding the text of interest, but also with the purpose of the book itself, the particular features of a certain type of Scriptural genre, how this particular passage relates to the Scriptures as a whole, how it fits into the flow of redemptive history, how it

relates to Christ, how it related to the culture of its period of writing, how the hearers would have understood it...and the list could go on. All that to simply say that there are some points of background that need be mentioned at the outset that will aid us in our understanding of Psalm 84. I want to consider several of them briefly with you.

First, let's consider authorship. As you know, many of the Psalms are written by David. However, many others are written by anonymous individuals. In Psalm 84, it is unclear who the author might be. It is possible that the Psalmist is David during a period of his life in which he was unable to go to the temple (or tabernacle), such as during his flight from Absalom (II Samuel 15). It is also possible that a Hebrew Old Testament believer making his pilgrimage to Jerusalem wrote this Psalm. The Law required that all men make the journey to Jerusalem to worship at the temple three times every year (this was specifically commanded by God at the second giving of the stone tablets to Moses in Exodus 34, cf. vv 23, 24). Undoubtedly, some men would have lived far off and the journey would have been long and difficult.

Which leads us to our second contextual note. There is a whole genre of the Psalms called pilgrimage songs. These songs are associated with journeys to the tabernacle or temple as the Israelites "went up" to Jerusalem for the annual feasts. These Psalms are also called "songs of ascent". Most of these songs of pilgrimage can be found between Psalm 120 and 134, however, there are a few others spread about throughout the book of Psalms, such as Psalm 84. When happening upon such Psalms, it is important that we attune our ears to hear the song of the pilgrim, on the way to worship at the temple, and to place into context the Psalm itself—that is, to understand the songs of ascent were meant to accompany the believer as they traveled to corporate worship, to make sacrifices to God, and perhaps, most importantly in Psalm 84, to draw near to God.

A third and final consideration pertains to the Hebrew pre-Christ culture. It can be readily understood from the Old Testament that although the God of Israel was clearly known to be omniscient and omnipresent, in the mind of the Israelite, God's earthly residence was the temple. To draw near to the temple and participate in worship through the sacrificial system was to, in a most holy and intimate way, draw near to God Himself, to be in close proximity to God. To be in the temple courts was to be simultaneously filled with gladness and reverence. As we begin to look more closely at Psalm 84, I think you will glimpse a picture of what I am saying here. The context is essential to our understanding if we are going to wholly appreciate the Scripture and in particular, Psalm 84. Hopefully the time spent discussing it here will enrich our further consideration of this Psalm.

Psalm 84 is neatly divided into three sections by the term *Selah*. This is probably a musical term meaning something similar to the idea of a "pause" and it provides us here with a sensible division of themes presented in this Psalm. One might describe these themes as the Pilgrim's Passion, the Pilgrim's Perspective, and the Pilgrim's Provision. Another observer has taken more of a chronological approach and labeled the divisions The Soul's Ambition, The Soul's Approach, and the Soul's Arrival.

So let's return to vv. 1-4, The Pilgrim's Passion. (Read vv. 1-4) I think to fully appreciate the exuberance of expression in these verses one must truly endeavor to place themselves in the sandals of the traveler writing here. Regardless of the translation or commentator read,

the Hebrew scholars' leave us little room for a wide variety of views on the author's emotional state. In the pilgrim's heart we witness a deep yearning or hunger to be in the place of God. Note the repetition in these four verses, "How lovely is your **dwelling place**...My soul longs, yes, faints for **courts of the Lord**...where she may lay her young, at **your altars**...Blessed are those who dwell in **your house**...*ever singing your praise*" As we noted earlier, all these references to the temple, in the Hebrew mind are equivocated with the idea of proximity, and all the privileges it brought – corporate worship, sacrifice at the altars and all the symbolism associated with that rite, and the feasts that celebrated God's faithfulness in the history of Israel's existence. The author was not simply glad to be "out of the house" for a few weeks and to make a trip down the road to a town where the markets were bigger, no, he was passionately focused on one thing – proximity to God. So much was this pilgrim consumed with desire for nearness to God, that he envied the little birds that were able to make their nests among the ledges, cracks and crannies in the temple. It is in this observation that we begin to understand how strongly the Hebrew mind equated physical proximity to the temple with spiritual proximity to God.

The author closes this refrain proclaiming the happiness of those who are able to dwell in the house of God. There are two groups the author may be referring to. The first group is the Levites who were charged with the temple duties and priestly functions, thereby securing for them a continual presence in the temple. More generally, however, the author may simply be referring to those who are allowed to "dwell in the house of God" or in other words, those who know God and are able to draw near to Him. Whatever the case, the psalmist makes it clear that to be near God, is to be ever singing His praise. Nearness to God is an inducement to praise, one that the author is eager to experience.

Verses 5-8 communicate to us the Pilgrim's Perspective (Read vv. 5-8). There are a number of interesting references made in this four-verse set, and while we cannot consider them all, there are a few that we cannot pass over without some further inspection. First we should note that in this second division of the Psalm, the author's focus shifts. He moves from the discussion of overwhelming yearning for nearness to God to describing the journey that will bring him into this nearness. Notice the "traveling language", if you will, used by the author here: "...strength...highways to Zion...go through the valley of Baca...strength to strength..." There is almost a cadence or a rhythm introduced here. The author is in a very physical sense describing the literal journey that he must make to Zion or Jerusalem. However, he is also, in another sense describing the spiritual aspects of that same journey.

Second, there are at least two word pictures here that will contribute to our understanding. In verse 5 we are told that those persons are happy who find their strength in God, who then are further described as those, "in whose hearts are the highways to Zion." Another interpretation reads, "who knows and loves the way to God's favor." Simply the *language* used here leaves us with a strong impression of the meaning. It is as if the desires and intents of the pilgrim's heart run along this highway that terminates in Zion, at the temple. Happy is the pilgrim whose inner man has set upon a course that will ultimately take him to Zion, to God's holy hill, and into the temple, a place of God's favor.

The next word picture describes the physical aspects of the journey that was made by this pilgrim to Zion. The Valley of Baca may have been an actual valley along the thoroughfare to Jerusalem, or it may have been representative of the dry and dusty ways that the travelers

took in transit. The word “Baca” actually means “weeping”. So what you have here is a possible reference to a physical feature of the pilgrimage, and an indication that the way had scarce refreshment, was hard, demanding, and not free of trials and difficulties. But, the pilgrims “make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.” The pilgrims would dig wells, pits, or cisterns in order to catch water and make their journey possible, and God, who gives the rain, would send the “early rains”.

These physical aspects of the road to Zion, however, have spiritual realities behind them. As the pilgrims endeavored to persevere in their journey to Zion, to practically make the way more passable, God would bless their efforts. Each pilgrim would go from strength to strength, or according to some, grace to grace, continually supported as they made their long sojourn. This continuous provision of enablement for the journey would bring each one to his cherished end, before God in Zion. Surely God had made the requirement of Jewish males that they were to make pilgrimage to Zion three times a year and just as surely God would provide the rain to fill their wells and cisterns, giving the pilgrims continual strength for their journey. God would make it possible for all of his requirements to be met.

The Psalmist concludes this section asking God to hear his prayer, to hear the longing of his heart to be near to God and to hear his praise of His provision on the journey. The Pilgrim’s Perspective here can be seen in the recognition of his pilgrimage being trying and difficult but not unaided. His journey is made through grace-empowered strength and will terminate at its required end because God will make it so. Happy is the pilgrim, for his pilgrimage is marked by an inner trajectory toward holiness, that is, in whose hearts are the highways to Zion, and the continual outward experience of God’s provision for strength and supplement.

The third and final section of this Psalm causes us to consider the Pilgrim’s Provision. (Read vv. 9-12). Verse 9 is of immediate interest as we note that the author identifies either God, or the “anointed” as a shield. And then he asks God to look at His anointed. Who is being referred to as the shield? God or the anointed? Who is the anointed? I think it likely that there may be two senses in which the verse can be taken. In either case, I believe that the word “shield” is being used to describe the anointed, therefore, the anointed one is designated as a protector. The anointed probably referred at least to the King, which, if David wrote the Psalm, was himself. The anointed, however, may have also referred to the Messiah to come, who we now know to be Christ. In any case, given that David was a symbol of the eternal king that was to come, both senses of the term should be maintained. Again here you have the author speaking of physical realities (the human king of Israel) with spiritual implications (Christ the coming Messiah). So the author calls on God to look on the face of his Protector and presumably not his own. Interestingly, we go on from here to verse 10, which begins with the preposition “for”, indicating some link with verse 9. We will return to this at the end of the message.

In verse 10 the pilgrim returns to the theme of the first section exuberantly declaring that a day in the courts of God, again referring to the Temple here, is better than 1000 elsewhere and to accept the lowliest of duties in the temple, the doorkeeper, was better than dwelling in the tents of wickedness. The pilgrim’s passion for proximity almost seems insatiable. In verse 11, explanation is given for this latest round of Godward longing. God is light and God is protection, making provision for the outward good of the pilgrim. God also bestows grace (favor) and glory (honor) making provision for the inward good of the pilgrim.

In closing his song, the Pilgrim confidently affirms that his good God withholds no good from those that walk uprightly and that those who trust in Him are happy. So, although early in the Psalm the pilgrim proclaims that the blessed are those who are in God's house, this physical manifestation of God is not necessary to know the blessing of God, as is confirmed when the author proclaims that the blessed are those who trust in Him. Note also that the pilgrim's provision, while a result of a God who withholds no good thing, is enjoyed by the pilgrim who trusts in Him. In other words, the pilgrim who trusts in Him is able to say without reserve that He withholds no good thing. In contrast, the one who does not trust God will not be able to readily endorse the same statement.

So, in brief review, we've considered the words of this Psalm from the vantage point of the pilgrim. We have seen that the Pilgrim's passion is for proximity to his God and that that proximity is best symbolized in the Old Testament believer's mind by the physical structure of the Temple. Next, we witnessed the Pilgrim's perspective on pilgrimage – on the journey that he must make through dry and difficult lands to the Temple. God sustains the pilgrim's sojourn as he goes from strength to strength, endeavoring to make provision along the way while God sees and blesses his efforts. The pilgrim is able to see the whole of the journey and express confidence that God will enable him to finish his route, even until Zion. Lastly, we hear the Pilgrim sing of God's provision, not only the outward manifestations of illumination and protection but also the inward benefits of grace and glory enabling the pilgrim to walk uprightly, in trust, rejoicing that nothing good is withheld from him by a sovereign God.

In conclusion, I want to consider 4/6 observations of this text with you for our benefit. I say observation because this Psalm is not instructive by way of commandment, but rather by way of demonstration. There are no commands in this Psalm, what there is however, is a rich and illustrious picture of a believer on pilgrimage, and much can be learned from the careful observation of him.

**First**, this witness to the Old Testament believer's sincere and heart felt prayer-song instructs us on the nature and character of the pilgrim and his pilgrimage. We are today, no less pilgrims on pilgrimage. There is a strong sense of already and not yet in this passage. Surely we must no longer travel to a physical place to draw near to God, and human priests and an animal sacrificial system no longer mediates our relationship to God. In God's providential redemptive historical plan we now possess a full measure of the holy spirit and are able to commune directly with God because of Christ's perfect work on the cross. However, like the pilgrim here, we remain in transit to Zion, the new Jerusalem, and our hearts ought to long for that level of intimacy that only the process of sanctification and then glorification in eternal nearness to God, will bring. We have, therefore, in this pilgrimage song a perspective on this life that should bring great peace and comfort. We long for our ultimate communion with God when we will be made perfect and will enjoy Zion forever. Yet we enjoy and drink deeply of the many foretastes He has, in His grace and mercy, given us here. We have the benefit of "the anointed" that is, Christ, and therefore the ability to draw near to God, even into the holy of holies; we have the great blessing of corporate worship; and we have the messy beauty of biblical body life. However, we realize that our pilgrimage here on Earth will be long and often difficult. We will dig our wells and our cisterns in order to make provision for ourselves, we will do what we can to make the journey well, and God in His

giving of grace, will send the early rains to fill and bless our efforts, He will move us from strength to strength until we each appear before Him in Zion. And on our way He himself will be our provision and that chiefly in Christ, the anointed one. He will be our illuminator and our protector giving us grace and glory. And as we grow in our trust of Him and His sovereignty we will become ever happier in an agreeable determination that He has indeed withheld no good thing from us. Can you see this as an overview of your life? Can you hear the rhythm, the cadence, of this Psalm in the quiet roar of the activity in your own day to day schedule. Are you able to step back and appreciate from the perspective of pilgrimage what your driving motives are, how it is you will “make it” and in what way you can be confident that God will provide? This pilgrim’s psalm provides us with answers to those questions. Possible illustration – Seattle to Dayton trip.

**A second observation** that can be made is a simple recognition of the God-centeredness, the Christ-centeredness, of both this text, as is in all of Scripture, and the writer’s focus. One cannot read this psalm and miss the all-consuming orienting genuine heart level desire that this pilgrim-author so clearly possesses. He has set His heart on proximity to God and taken up His pilgrimage with great gladness in anticipation of God’s provision. And it is in verse 9 that our New Testament minds are turned to Christ, God’s anointed. Apart from Christ what more would our “pilgrimages” be than utter folly and thrashing about in the night for some sense of direction, and meaning. All our efforts to infuse destiny (that is a sense of destination) into our lives would not lead us to the courts of God but rather the doorway of hell. It is through Christ, and Christ only that we can step from verse 9 to verse 10 and proclaim, “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.” And this here is the very important link between verses 9 & 10 that I mentioned earlier, all carried by the preposition FOR. Apart from Christ, a day in the courts of God would be a terror and a wrath certain to end in eternal punishment and damnation. So, we must also note that ultimately, all the blessings of God are qualified. This portion of Scripture is as much a comfort and well-spring of joy for the believer as it is a warning to the unbeliever who continues in his heart on a journey away from God.

**Thirdly**, and reflecting on vv. 9 and 10 again, we can note that the heart set on pilgrimage for the reason of proximity to God, is the heart that has abandoned the temporary delights of the world. Does our heart resonate with the pilgrims in that we have truly forsaken our love of the world and all it has to offer – or do our hearts desperately seek “a thousand days elsewhere” (v. 10). Our affections betray the true state of our hearts. I believe it takes a long time before we truly tire ourselves of chasing after earthly pleasures. I offer *myself* as the surest evidence of this. It often seems that it is only the gray heads that are able to speak of heaven in a way that convinces the hearer of their being done with all that is here on Earth and having set their highest affections on the courts of God. And again, this kind of affection flows not from a rigid denunciation of all that is material only for the sake of denouncing, thinking that somehow this will bring us closer to God, but rather many moments in deep reflection on this sweetest of knowledges given to us in verse 9, namely that there is one who mediates, one upon whom God looks for our justification, who has taken our burden of sin, replaced it with His robes of perfect righteousness. It is with this great heart-rendering truth in mind that we come to fully understand that one man cannot travel two roads. There are no

dual-pilgrimage programs. It is in utter delight, although not untinged by hardwork and hardship, that our affections become wholly for Him and for the road that leads to Him. All diverging ways, wandering lanes, and street-side attractions, become merely poor competitors for the drawing affection that has so firmly gripped our hearts and the enabling grace that has sufficiently empowered our step all along the way, even through the Valley of Weeping, until we appear, finally, before God in Zion.

**Fourthly**, and briefly, note the sheer sense of abandoned exuberance that the Psalmist expresses in vv. 1-4 when he considers the destiny of his pilgrimage. As I mentioned earlier, it is hard to get away from the very clear picture of excited emotion and the language of yearning in this passage. Let it be clear, and we be reminded, that one sure element of going to the temple was the anticipation of *corporate worship*. Does your heart resonate the way that this Psalmist's heart does when contemplating corporate worship? The picture of the pilgrim-psalmist given here is instructive – regardless of our outward manner of expression, whether it be demonstrative or more reserved, when in contemplation of “going up to the Temple”, that is, drawing near to God in corporate worship, our inner man should be alive with yearning, longing, delight, and anticipation. If in our hearts there is no movement toward joy, toward gladness, when thinking of corporate worship, we are guilty of undervaluing proximity to our great and mighty God. This disposition will ultimately leave us with empty tanks, so to say, on our pilgrimage roads to Zion. God-inspired delight is the fuel for grace-enabled pilgrimage.

## Conclusion

This is a beautiful Psalm and we can read it often to bring to mind the promises of God and a perspective on our lives. May God bless the preaching of His word to our hearts and may we know how it is we are to be Pilgrims on this earth.