

The prophetic intensity of the Asaph psalms yields to the longing for spiritual refreshment and renewal found in Psalms 84-85. These psalms are attributed to the Sons of Korah from the tribe of Levi (Pss 42-49, 84, 85, 87, 89). King David made the descendants of Kohath worship leaders “in the house of the Lord after the ark came to rest there” (1 Chron 6:22, 31, 38). Their calling as worship leaders and the evidence of these psalms proves that the Korah family history is a beautiful redemption story. In the wilderness the Korah clan rebelled against Moses and Aaron and suffered a devastating judgment (Num 16). The family was nearly wiped out but at least one of son survived and his descendants became temple worship leaders in Israel.

The psalmist expresses his heartfelt longing for the real presence of the living God. There is an ecstatic intensity about his language: “how lovely!” . . . “my soul yearns, even faints,” . . . “my heart and my flesh cry out.”¹ Aesthetic images of nesting birds and springs in the desert capture our imagination. Deep emotion and satisfaction is conveyed by communal praise invoked by God’s loving presence. Yahweh anoints his leaders and withholds no good thing from “those whose walk is blameless.” The psalmist’s soulful yearning is inspired not by ritual habit but by an abiding relationship with the Lord Almighty, his King and his God. While his pilgrimage is deeply personal, the psalmist shares his quest and enters into worship with “those whose strength” is in God. He is in the company of like-minded pilgrims who find their happiness and fulfillment in the presence of God.

We need some skill in reading the Psalms. Not just anyone can pick up the psalms and see what is going on. It takes a trained eye to see what is really there. We need a radiologist to read our X-ray and we need understanding to read the Psalms. A true intellectual grasp of the psalms only heightens their emotional intensity, spiritual richness and personal, practical application. This psalm is prayed by a person who has "decided to leave an ego-centered world and enter a God-centered world."²

The House of the Lord

*How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.
Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young—*

¹ Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Psalm 84. Spurgeon wrote, “This sacred ode is one of the choicest of the collection; it has a mild radiance about it, entitling it to be called The Pearl of Psalms. If the twenty-third be the most popular, the one-hundred- and-third the most joyful, the one-hundred-and-nineteenth the most deeply experimental, the fifty-first the most plaintive, this is one of the most sweet of the Psalms of peace.”

² Peterson, Answering God, 23.

*a place near your altar,
O Lord Almighty, my King and my God.
Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.*

Psalm 84:1-5

The positive tenor of this psalm encourages today's believers to embrace their life together in the presence of God as a joyous privilege and wonderful blessing. The progressive revelation of God transposes the psalmist's "passion for the sanctuary" into the believer's passion for Christ. Everything the temple stood for is fulfilled in him. Jesus is "God's true temple" (John 2:21; Rev 21:22). "And because He is God's temple, God abides in Jesus. Jesus is the one place where we meet God, and we too abide in Jesus, being united to God in Him."³ The psalmist's "language of love poetry" finds its true significance in Christ and in the Body of Christ (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19).⁴ We are invited by Jesus to make our home in him, "Remain in me, as I also remain in you" (John 15:4). The homemaking word (*meinai*) is used again when Jesus says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them" (John 6:56). Jesus used the word again when he said, "If you hold to my teaching (or, if you make your home in my Word), you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

When Jesus walked out of the temple for the last time, the old sacrificial, Levitical priestly temple system was about to be rendered obsolete (Matthew 24:1). "The temple worship of the ancient people of God is all over and the way to God's holy presence has been opened up for all by means of this one sacrifice for the sin of the whole world."⁵ "Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone' (Ps 118:22). Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which you must be saved"(Acts 4:10-12). Peter's Spirit-filled message confirms that Jesus has replaced the temple. The temple has been eclipsed by the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Zambian New Testament scholar Joe Kapolyo emphasizes the significance of Jesus abandoning institutional Judaism and the whole sacrificial system.⁶ Only Christ fulfills the human need for salvation and the longing of the soul. If the temple is done away with, how much more will all religious traditions be eclipsed by the presence of Jesus? Jesus is Lord. He is the one who is greater than Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, ancestral worship, tribal animism, existential selfism, and all forms of Christ-less Christianity.⁷

The original band of disciples made an amazing adjustment to the physical departure of Jesus. They could no longer walk with Jesus nor enjoy table fellowship. They could not see him heal the sick or hear him preach. He was no longer there for them in a literal sense and they had to adjust. The New Testament is a testimony to the fact that the disciples made this adjustment amazingly well. Of course, they did so not in their own strength, but through the power and

³ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 165.

⁴ Kidner, *Psalms*, 303.

⁵ Bruner, *Matthew*, vol. 2, 757.

⁶ Kapolyo, "Matthew," 1161.

⁷ Webster, *Preaching Hebrews*, 112.

wisdom of the Spirit of the risen and ascended Lord.⁸

The absence of a literal, physical Jesus is as relevant for us as it was for the original band of disciples. The disciples had to learn how to follow Jesus without his physical presence. This is true for today's disciples as well. The danger of a "false literal" confronts the church today as it always has. Given the absence of Jesus, we are given to substitutes that stand in the place of a physical Jesus. The literal concreteness of a pre-Easter Jesus becomes transposed into the "false literal" experience of spiritual leaders who focus attention on themselves. It can be powerful personalities, but it can also be ecclesiastical bureaucracies, church buildings, cherished practices, and spiritual experiences, that stand in the place of Jesus. Traditional religious rituals, mega-church superstars, and down-home country pastors can substitute for the Spirit of the risen Christ. Instead of the church dependent on the fruit and gifts of the Spirit of Christ we give ourselves to "Christian" idols that stand in the place of a literal Jesus. Instead of shared leadership and every-member ministry, believers tragically live out their faith vicariously through charismatic pastors who they can see and touch. Jesus is gone, but he has not left a vacuum. The gift of the Holy Spirit makes possible the real presence of the risen and exalted Christ in the Body of Christ, the Church.

We must be clear, the longing expressed in Psalm 84 must be for the living God made real in Jesus and not some false literal that attempts to substitute for God, for that would be an idol. This yearning for the presence of God runs counter to the wisdom of the age that says the church must adapt to "the rise of consumerism." Church consultants may be right in their market analysis but they are wrong in their understanding of the church:

"What goes for cars, doctors, tires, and schools also goes for churches. Americans go where they think they can get the best deal, or where they think their needs will be met, regardless of previous affiliations. This means that a few weeks of poor sermons, weak music, or a dirty nursery may prompt present members to start looking elsewhere. . . . More and more Americans are opting for 'full service churches' that can offer quality and variety in music, extensive youth programs, diverse educational opportunities, a counseling staff, support groups, singles' ministry, athletic activities, multiple Sunday morning services, a modern nursery, and the other services and programs only available in larger churches."⁹

The church is not a religious institution programmed to meet consumer needs. Psalm 84 celebrates the inefficient irrelevance of the counter-culture household of faith. We cannot prove the societal worth of the church to a secular world. Nor can we promote the gospel as a product – designed to meet our emotional and spiritual felt needs. It is not our aim to create brand loyalty in a highly competitive marketplace. What we can do is love people and call to them to repentance and to new life in Christ. We can offer sinners like ourselves the gospel of grace. We can invite them into the Body of Christ through baptism and communion. Worship is our highest priority and greatest passion, but as Calvin warned we are not, "sedulously attentive to the observance of

⁸ Webster, *The God Who Kneels*, 119-121.

⁹ Leith Anderson, *Dying For Change* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 1990), 49, 51.

outward ceremonies, but destitute of genuine heart godliness.”¹⁰ The relevant irrelevance of the psalmist’s quest for the presence of God is exactly what we want today in every aspect of the life of the church.

The passion of Psalm 84 corresponds to the church of Acts’ devotion to “the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). In Acts 2, description and prescription merge to form the nexus between God’s work and our work, rendering everything else superfluous and extraneous. In Psalm 84 we are given a special understanding of what it means to be devoted to these four disciplines, not as a to-do check-list, but as the way we seek God’s presence. The heartfelt yearning of Psalm 84 is transposed into practical spiritual disciplines or devotions that give the church authentic focus, identity, growth, and fellowship. The blessing of the real presence of Christ means that we are at home with God. It is as natural and normal as song birds nesting in the temple eaves. Beatitude based believers have humbled themselves and acknowledged their utter dependence upon the mercy of God.

The Journey of Desire

*Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.
Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty;
listen to me, God of Jacob.
Look on our shield, O God;
look with favor on your anointed one.*

Psalm 84:5-9

The psalmist’s journey may be a literal, physical pilgrimage to Jerusalem, or it may be an inward, meditative spiritual journey to the presence of God.¹¹ Either way the psalm gives voice to those who join desire, devotion, and discipline, and put one step in front of the other in their faith journey. The line, “whose hearts are set on pilgrimage,” is literally, “highways in their hearts.” That is to say that the journey to God is in their heart and on their mind. Even when the journey passes through the arid wilderness, the valley of Baka, the sojourners have “set their hearts on pilgrimage” (Ps 84:5). They embrace the blessing of God who provides pools of fresh water in a dry and weary land. What might have been “a place of dry adversity” becomes “a place of springs” because of the blessings of God.¹² Instead of growing weaker and weaker as they journey on, they become stronger and stronger. Hope in the Lord renews their strength, making it possible for them to “soar on wings like eagles” and “run and not grow weary,” and “walk and

¹⁰ Calvin, Psalms, vol.5:357

¹¹ Ross, Psalms, 753.

¹² Ross, Psalms, 754.

not be faint” (Isa 40:31).

The psalmist focuses on the Lord God Almighty. “Hear my prayer, God of angel armies.” He seeks the direct and immediate response of the God of Jacob. The truth behind these titles draws on the history of covenant promises and the work of salvation. He prays for the king, God’s anointed one, who is strengthened by God to defend the people of God. He prays on the basis of God’s promises to the house of David (2 Sam 7:16). The psalmist is not praying to a vague generic deity who is free of any “intellectualized understanding.”¹³ “Modern spiritual consciousness is predicated upon the fact that God is gone,” writes poet Christian Wiman, “and spiritual experience, for many of us, amounts mostly to an essential, deeply felt and necessary, but ultimately inchoate and transitory feeling of oneness or unity with existence. It is mystical and valuable, but distant.”¹⁴ This is not the understanding of the psalmist who depends upon the God who has made himself known, the God of Jacob. The winsome skeptic’s disdain for empty religious jargon meets in the Psalms the power of God’s personal revelation. This revelation is alive and active and penetrating to the core. If you are tempted to “do a little linguistic dance around Christianity,” its time to grapple with the fact that God has revealed himself and this is not godtalk – this is revelation.¹⁵ God has spoken and the “ever praising” worshiper believes in “the primacy of God’s word in everything: in creation, in salvation, in judgment, in blessing, in mercy, and in grace.”¹⁶

The Blessing of God

*Better is one day in your courts
than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.
For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
the Lord bestows favor and honor;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose walk is blameless.
Lord Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in you.*
Psalm 84:10-12

At home in the house of God is the psalmist’s deepest joy (Ps 27:4; 73:25; Phil 3:8). He would rather be in the presence of God than anywhere else. Just one day in Christ is better than a thousand days apart from Christ. Posted up at the entrance way as an usher or a janitor is more fulfilling for the psalmist than being seated at the head table in the East Room of the White House or winning a Noble prize or receiving an Oscar. The psalmist’s “theory of relativity” means that nothing compares to the presence of God. Our translation “doorkeeper” is a bit misleading, because the official at the gate of the temple was a highly respected figure (1 Chron

¹³ Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁶ Peterson, *Answering God*, 86.

26:1,12) who played an important role in administering the liturgy at the gate (Psalm 15). But the psalmist does not use the term for “gatekeeper.” Instead, he speaks of “waiting at the threshold.” The humble and lowly status of the worshiper is preferred over official status. Or as one translation reads, “I’d rather scrub floors in the house of my God than be honored as a guest in the palace of sin” (Ps 84:10, The Message).

The reason for his passion for God is no mystery. “God, like a sun, gives grace to his people; and like a shield, he gives them glory.”¹⁷ It means that “the Spirit of glory and of God rests” on all those in Christ (1 Pet 4:14). It means that “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:32). It means that because of the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, and the obedience of Jesus Christ and his sprinkled blood we have a living hope, a lasting inheritance, and a coming salvation (1 Pet 1:2-5). The promise of God’s presence is transposed into an even higher key. “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes’” (Rev 7:17). It means that “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:7).

¹⁷ Ross, Psalms, 758.