

“Better is One Day”

Psalm 84 ¹

What would you say has been the very best day of your life—maybe because of one special event; or maybe the whole day was special? Or how about if you were designing a very, very special day not too far into the future, what might it be like?

To go in a different direction, if you were spiritually and emotionally spent and had twenty-four or thirty-six hours that you could spend in any way you liked in order to recharge, where would you go? What would you do? Or finally, if you knew for certain that, although you feel fine right now, you would be resurrected by this time tomorrow, how would you spend these hours?

A single day can take many different directions, can't it? Psalm 84, which we read earlier, is home to a familiar verse that refers to “a single day”: “*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*” (84:10). Let's look at Psalm 84 again to see if we can deepen our understanding of it.

Although we can't know for sure, it seems likely that this psalm originated prior to the exile and that it may have been sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple for the three required feasts every year. Of all the psalms that celebrate Zion and its Temple as God's dwelling place, the 84th has long been the favorite. It is joyful and exuberant, and seems to suggest that the king himself may have been a part of the procession.

I invite you to follow along in your Bible as we look at these twelve verses together. . . .

vv. 1-2 *How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.*

I don't know about you, but I don't use the words “long” or “longing” very often in ordinary life. As much as I like meatloaf and barbecue—not at the same time, of course—I don't think I've ever said, “I long for meatloaf.” Pastor Richard Farmer helped me deepen my understanding of “longing” when he told this story:

“I have a 95-year-old grandmother. No one has heard me preach more than three times without hearing a story about my grandmamma. . . . I am the second born of her 65-year-old daughter, and my grandmother makes me happy.

“We talk on the phone every Sunday night no matter where I am in the world. When I talk to her or when I see her, as I will next week, it's not drudgery for me to enjoy her presence. Over these last forty-three years, I have simply bathed in the sunlight of her presence. I don't say ‘Oh, I've got to go see my grandmother.’ It's ‘I get to see Sweetie Pie.’

Farmer then noted that as long as we come to worship with the attitude, “I *have* to go to worship” rather than “I *get* to go to worship,” we'll never understand what the Psalmist is talking about in Psalm 84. The psalmist is talking about a relationship with God that makes being together a delight.² That's what “*singing for joy*” is all about.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 24, 2019.

² Richard A. Farmer, “The ‘What's’ and the ‘Why’ of Worship,” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 150.

Although most translations begin Psalm 84 with “*How lovely is your dwelling place,*” it would perhaps be more accurate to say “*How beloved is your dwelling place.*” The poet’s point is not about aesthetics, but delight.

Similarly, while most translations end verse 2 with “*the living God,*” the word being translated is not “alive” as the opposite of “dead,” but “lively,” as in “the Giver of Life.” The psalmist is expressing a deep, visceral desire to experience the Presence of God. Perfunctory, “check-off-the-box” worship is not what our poet has in mind!

vv. 3-4 *Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise!*

This is a beautiful image. While Israel certainly knew that God was not limited to the physical confines of the Temple,³ they frequently found that their sense of God’s presence was enhanced by being in the Temple precincts. This is similar to how we often feel in the silence of a great cathedral. We, too, know that God is no more present there than anywhere else, but the majesty and enormity of the sacred space often enables us to sense the Holy in deeper ways.

Since my teen years, I have often sought out church sanctuaries when my soul was troubled, in times of great sorrow, or when great decisions loomed. While I greatly benefit from and look forward to experiences of corporate worship—especially with you!—I particularly like to be in those same sanctuaries, in darkness, alone. I like to be “near the altar.”

In verse 3, the psalmist thinks about the simple, ordinary birds that make their homes in the many crevices of the Temple courts, and wishes that he might live in such physical proximity to sacred space. I’m reminded of the prophetess Anna, in the New Testament, after whom our daughter, Anna, was named:

³⁶ *And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,*

³⁷ *and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day (Luke 2:36-37).*

That’s what the psalmist was pining for; and all this reminds me of one of my favorite missionary stories:

Stuart Sacks was a missionary in Paraguay. On one occasion, Stuart was eating dinner when a local named Rafael came and sat down on his porch. When Stuart went out to see what Rafael wanted, Rafael said, “**Ham, henek met.**” Stuart asked a second time, and Rafael gave the same response. Rafael’s words meant, “I don’t want anything. I have just come near.”

“I understood what he was saying, but I didn’t understand its significance,” Stuart said. When Stuart described this encounter to a veteran missionary, the missionary explained that Rafael had really not wanted anything except the pleasure of simply being near him.⁴

You and I come to worship, and our Father asks us, “What brings you here, my child?” At our best, we respond, “*Ham, henek met.* I don’t want anything, Father. I have just come near to you.” Being in God’s Presence strengthens us. It increases our faith. It gives us vision. *Ham, henek met.* If you were to visit my little kitchen here in Columbia, you would see those words on the cupboard.

³ 1 Kings 8:23-53; Isaiah 66:1-2

⁴ Stuart Sacks, Villanova, PA (Preaching Today.com)

Verse 4 is the first of three beatitudes in this psalm:

- *Blessed are those who **dwell** in your house, ever **singing** your praise! (v. 4).*
- *Blessed are those whose **strength** is in you, in whose hearts are the highways to Zion (v. 5).*
- *Blessed is the one who **trusts** in you! (v. 12).*

We can note several things about these blessings, focusing on the bolded words; but before we look at these four words, we need to remember that “blessed” basically means “happy.” True, deep human happiness can only be found in right relationship with our Creator, and it is sobering to note that the United States ranks #19 on the 2019 World Happiness Report. Even worse, our reported happiness has taken a nose dive in the last thirty years.⁵ **We need these four words and the realities they represent:**

1. **Dwell:** We’ve looked at “dwelling” “near to the heart of God” already, and if we’re living in a deep love relationship with God—which we can do anywhere and everywhere through God’s Spirit who lives in us, if we are in Christ—we will not only be happy, but we will have a deep sense of joy within. And not only will we be joyful; this inner joy will have a tendency to burst forth in singing, whether in worship, in the car, or in the shower!
2. **Singing:** Although we may be most familiar with verse 1 as “*my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God,*” a better translation is “*my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.*” There’s that singing thing again!
3. **Strength:** Verse 7 talks about going “*from strength to strength,*” and Paul later wrote that “*I can do all things through him who strengthens me*” (Philippians 4:13). You and I need strength for the challenges of daily life. We need strength to face temptation. Indeed, believers around the world who face persecution do not ask us to pray that they not be persecuted. They ask us to pray that they will be faithful; that is, that they will have strength for the persecutions they face.⁶
4. **Trust:** To trust in someone is to believe in the reliability, truth, ability, and strength of that person . . . and to keep on believing those things. To say “God is Good, All the Time, and All the Time, God is Good,” is an expression of trust. If we are truly living “near to the heart of God,” we will know deep in our spirits that God is fully and completely trust-worthy, we will keep on trusting . . . and in that trust we will rejoice.

vv. 5-7 *Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose hearts 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.*

Some translations render the last part of verse 5 as “*whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.*” That’s the same idea as “*in whose hearts are the highways to Zion,*” but I like it better. In its original context, the poet was thinking of making pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but there are other pilgrim images with which we’re probably more familiar. Here are several:

⁵ <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2019/the-sad-state-of-happiness-in-the-united-states-and-the-role-of-digital-media/>

⁶ See also Deuteronomy 33:25; Hebrews 13:2.

- Oh Shenandoah, I long to see you, Away, you rolling river.
Oh Shenandoah, I long to see you, Away, I'm bound away, 'cross the wide Missouri.⁷
- This world is not my home. I'm just a-passing through.
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the Blue.
- I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger, a-travelin through this world below.
There is no sickness, toil, or danger in that bright world to which I go.⁸

Verse 6 talks about making pilgrimage through the Valley of Baca. We don't know what that was or where it was. It may have been a metaphor similar to "*the valley of the shadow of death*" (Psalm 23:4). The context seems to indicate that this valley was a barren, difficult place through which pilgrims had to travel on their way to Jerusalem.

There are two things we might call to mind as we think about this verse and this valley. On the one hand, Psalm 23 reminds us that we do not walk that "lonesome valley" alone, but with our Lord beside us, seen or unseen (Psalm 23:4). And on the other hand, notice that as pilgrims pass through that barren valley, they—we—"make it a place of springs."

Sometimes we phrase that same idea as "bloom where you're planted." The idea is that because of our deep, intimate, joyful relationship with God, even barren places in this world and in our lives become fertile and verdant because we were there . . . because we *are* there. Another way to get at this is to ask, "When people see you coming, what sort of weather do they expect?"

**vv. 8-9 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!**

These verses remind us that Israel's king, "*our shield*," may have been in the procession; but whether the king was present or not, this is a prayer for God's blessing on the nation's leader. In a week and in a season such as the one through which we currently travel, perhaps we should remind ourselves that Scripture enjoins us to make "*supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way*" (1 Timothy 2:2).

v. 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.

This verse is the "signature verse" of Psalm 84. While this verse is hyperbole—exaggeration to make a point—that point reminds us to take stock of the real priorities that drive our lives. It is often the case that what we *say* is most important to us is not really what's most important. One of the best tests through which to discover your real priorities is to ask those who live with you or who know you best.

Along this line, you may remember that in the Broadway play *My Fair Lady*, Eliza is courted by a man named Freddy. Freddy writes love letters to Eliza every day, but Eliza's response to all of these written promises is to cry out in frustration: "Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! Don't talk of stars burning above! If you're in love, show me! Don't talk of love lasting through time. Make no undying vow. If you love me, show me, and show me *now!*"

Whatever you want the real priorities of your life to be, walk the walk!

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oh_Shenandoah

⁸ See Hebrews 11:13-16.

vv. 11-12 ***For 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. O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!***

While it is not uncommon for God to be associated with light,⁹ this is the only place in the Older Testament where God is clearly referred to as a “sun.” Perhaps recalling the pillar of fire in the wilderness,¹⁰ the poet rejoices that God provides both light and protection to those who journey toward nearness with God.

The poet also rejoices in the fact that God provides what is essential along the journey, as was the case in the wilderness long ago. Another psalm, Psalm 23, reminds us that God provides both a divine “*rod and staff*” of protection and a “*table in the presence of our enemies.*”

Centuries later, Peter would make the same point when he wrote that God’s ³ *divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire (2 Peter 1:3-4).*¹¹

Two more things as we wrap this up. First, the context of this psalm has to do with spiritual community. The poet is not pining for a solitary hike, but yearning for a joyful procession of many pilgrims headed to the same destination. What he has in mind is similar to what the writer of Hebrews would later pen: ²⁴ *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Hebrews 10:24-25).* The pilgrimage of following Jesus is not one we take alone, but in company with one another.

Finally, I’ve told you this story before, but it makes the point with which I want to end. A woman bought a car that had lots of high-tech doodads on it. The first time she drove the car in the rain, she turned a knob she thought would start the windshield wipers, but the wipers didn’t start. Instead, a message flashed across the dash: “Drive car through 360 degrees.” She had no idea what that meant, and so when she got home she read the manual (always a good idea).

She learned that while trying to turn on the windshield wipers she had turned off the internal compass, and the car had lost its sense of direction. To correct the problem, the car had to be driven in a full circle, pointed north, and then the compass had to be reset.

“Each time we gather to worship,” she noted, “we are resetting our internal compass. We reestablish ‘true north’ in our souls, remembering who God is and what God’s Truth proclaims.”¹² Psalm 84 reminds us that worshiping together resets our compass, points us toward Real Life, and reconnects us with True Joy.

So what is the best use of a day? God’s intended gift in each of our days is that they be spent in intimate, personal, loving, joyful relationship with Him. That’s why we call today “the present”! Psalm 84 reminds us that rejoicing in God is the heart of worship, after all.

⁹ Psalm 27:1, 36:9, 43:3; James 1:17

¹⁰ Exodus 13:21; Psalm 119:105

¹¹ The passage continues: ⁵ *For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

¹² Nancy Cheatham, Olathe, Kansas.