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Psalm 84

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PSALM 84

By Carol Shoun

¹ *How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord Almighty!*

² *My soul yearns, even faints
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.*

What a beautiful expression of longing to be in the presence of God! We can only imagine how it must have felt to be able to enter the courts of God's physical dwelling. For this psalmist, the intensity of feeling—spiritual, emotional, even physical—was overwhelming.

Many scholars believe that this psalm speaks of pilgrimage to the annual Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. Christians do not have the luxury of an annual physical connection with God. While we enjoy his constant presence in a spiritual sense, and hold on to the knowledge that his Spirit lives in our hearts, there are nevertheless times when we, like the psalmist, cry out for the day when we will be physically in his presence. In a very real sense, then, we join the Israelites of old on a life-long pilgrimage to his dwelling place. Let's allow them to teach us, through this psalm, about faithful pilgrimage.

⁵ *Blessed are those whose strength is in
you,
who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.*

Where are the hearts of the pilgrims? Although yearning profoundly for the destination, they

have set their hearts on the pilgrimage—the journey. Too often, we press determinedly through our days on the way to our goals, dismissing the things that happen along the way as distractions. Our focus is on the product, not the process; we allow the small moments of each day to pass unnoticed as we reach for the big Moments of arrival that we believe will bring us happiness and a sense of security. We spend our days resolutely “on our way,” and then find that we have arrived at a place that feels empty.

But the psalmist seems to understand that a life of faith is the journey itself. It is living *in*, and growing through, each moment as it happens. Our eyes are on the Destination, but our hearts remain focused on each step of the journey. Our identity as pilgrims comes from what we are as we take each small step. And some of those steps are not easy:

⁶ *As they pass through the Valley of Baca,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with
pools.*

⁷ *They go from strength to strength
till each appears before God in Zion.*

⁸ *Hear my prayer, O Lord God Almighty;
listen to me, O God of Jacob.*

The Valley of Baca is thought to be a symbolic reference, as there is no known valley of that name in the Holy Land. Pilgrims on their way to the mid-October Feast of Tabernacles would be traveling through a land scorched by the summer's lack of rain,

and by hot sirocco winds. The trip would surely involve hardship; indeed, the root of the word Baca means “to weep,” hence the frequent interpretation *valley of weeping*. Yet somehow, as they pass through the parched valley of weeping, the pilgrims are able to “make it a place of springs.” Is it possible that, drawing upon their strength that is in God (v 5), they grow through the adversity so that their own tears become like springs?

We understand God’s promise to us of spiritual growth and maturity through trial, but sometimes our vision is so clouded by the tears of today that we cannot see the hope of tomorrow. Perhaps we can infer that at those times it is okay for us to pause, allowing the tears to become springs that will then strengthen us, before we move on. In the words of Ardis Whitman:

... There are times when it is hard to believe in the future, when we are temporarily just not brave enough. When this happens, concentrate on the present . . . Look forward to the beauty of the next moment, the next hour. . . the likelihood that tonight the stars will shine and tomorrow the sun will shine. Sink roots into the present until the strength grows to think about tomorrow.

God did not leave his children to rely solely on springs of their own making. He was attentive to their prayer. Toward the end of their journey, the pilgrims would encounter the advent of Palestine’s rainy season, which begins in mid-October with the *early or autumn rains*—often a series of thunderstorms. Direct help from God would come, but not softly packaged.

The presence of hardship on the pilgrims’ journey seems to have been neither unexpected nor unwelcome. Certainly, there would be moments when

they would feel tired, discouraged, or weak. But the psalmist’s words suggest that they held tightly to the times of strength, going “from strength to strength,” until each appeared before God. Perhaps that is the rest of their lesson for us. Fully living each moment of our pilgrimage often leaves us feeling hurt or weak, or even afraid. But if we can learn, as the Israelites did, to plant our moments of strength as firm stepping stones on our difficult journey, then we too can go from strength to strength until we each appear before God.

¹⁰ *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.*
¹¹ *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.*

As distant as it may seem to us, the day of appearance before God *will* come. On that day, our understanding of the enormity of God’s loving provision and protection as we have traveled will be made perfect. And that day—even if it were to be only one day—will be more than worth the journey.

¹² *O Lord Almighty,
blessed is the man who trusts in you.*

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