

The Christian Pilgrimage (Psalm 84)

Mack Tomlinson | illbehonest.com

Psalm 84. As we turn there, I just want to remind us of a generalization - maybe a little theology - concerning the Psalms. The Psalms stand in a way in a unique place in Scripture. Of course, the multi-varied reality of 66 books in one book, there's many purposes for various books in the Scripture. I think of Hebrews and how uniquely it stands alone with one special emphasis in the New Testament.

And you could say that about many books of the Bible, but to me, the Psalms have a uniqueness that no other book of the Bible holds. Especially in two ways: Number one, we know that it was the psalter of the Old Testament people. For generations, from the Old Testament era as the Old Testament was compiled, and not just the Psalms. There was the Song of Moses they sang in coming through the Exodus deliverance. I think of Deborah and Barak's psalm in Judges. And so many songs in the Old Testament, but the psalmist - whether that's David or Asaph or even Moses, in the collection of the psalms that we have, stands in a unique way, because it is a song book. And throughout the history of the Christian church, for some parts of the body of Christ, the only song book. And so, you look for instance at Psalm 120 to 134. Those psalms are known as the songs of ascent. And the pilgrims among Israel - the saints or the people of God, who would go up to Jerusalem, or to different feasts - they would sing some of those songs especially. And so it's a song book, and we should make it that.

But it's also a prayer book. How many of the psalms are either entire prayers or they're filled with prayers of all kinds? And one of the unique things about the Psalms is the multi-faceted experiences the psalmist expresses: Anger. Doubt. Grief. Anguish. Unbelief. Tears. Hope. Joy. Ecstasy. Praise. We could keep naming adjectives or adverbs or various nouns that the psalmist expresses under inspiration. And that is because God wants us as believers to find in the Psalms spiritual antibiotics for what ails us. We should live in the Psalms.

I endeavor to read three to five psalms every day with my other portions of Bible reading. Now, when I get to Psalm 119, that slows down a little bit. I'll divide it up. But you know what I'm saying. So, Psalm 84 is one of my favorites. It is so amazing. And when you read a psalm and you chew the cud, you will harvest. Ben, you don't even know what I'm talking about, but that's alright - chewing the cud, meditating on what you hear, what you read. You come up with so much food for prayer; so much food for faith; so much rich encouragement. It's astounding.

And to me, Psalm 84 is that. Because here's what Psalm 84 is about - before we read it - kingdom perspective, pilgrimage, and promises. Kingdom perspective, pilgrimage, and promises. Let's read Psalm 84. I'll read from the ESV. "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. 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. Selah. Blessed are those whose strength is in You, in whose heart 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. O Lord God of Hosts, hear my prayer. Give ear,

O God of Jacob. Selah. Behold our shield, O God. Look on the face of Your anointed. 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. For the Lord God is a sun and shield. The Lord bestows favor and honor." I like the authorized version: "The Lord gives grace and glory." "No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of Hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in You."

Perspective. Pilgrimage. Promises. In a real sense, that is what the Christian life is all about, isn't it? The perspective - that is, the outlook, the worldview, if you will, of the believer - how they see things, how they adjust to things, how we choose to live and believe in our pilgrimage, and the promises of God that are ours, for our pilgrimage. Every Christian is on pilgrimage, the Bible tells us, with kingdom perspective that's developing. Romans 12:1-2. The believer, the Bible tells us, both in the Old and New Testament, is a pilgrim, a sojourner, a stranger in the earth. In this world, the Bible says, we are looking for a city whose builder and maker is God. Hebrews 11 says they confessed that they were pilgrims and strangers on the earth.

So, think about this, beloved. Don Currin and I are both 63 years old. It's like a summer passing that we were 20 years old. Ours, for all of us, is a quick journey on this earth. From birth to death, from the cradle to the grave, from the womb to the tomb, to the grave to the skies... James says life is a vapor, and it's here and gone. John Wesley said this life is only a dressing room for eternity. How are you dressing these days?

We have had in our town Denton, Texas, recently young teenagers die tragically. Unexpectedly. And so it's not only people who are over 50 that begin to think about the end of life and eternity, every one of us must have this perspective that life is truly a vapor. You're 20 - boom - you're 60. Where did 40 years go? You can't track it.

This Christian life we're in is a journey, but Psalm 84 certainly shows us that it's the best of journey's. It is the most wonderful trip. Now, many of the psalms reflect David's pilgrimage and perspective. Psalm 119 for instance, is his perspective about what? The Word of God. verses in that psalm, at least 171 of them speak about the commandments, precepts, statutes, testimonies of the Lord, the law of God. Perspective. Psalm 73 is David's perspective about what? The wicked. Their prosperity. How easy they have it. And it cast him down, discouraged him, confused him, until, he says, I went into the house of God. Perspective clears. Eternity is in view. And he sees their end. Psalm 73 His perspective of the prosperity of the wicked. His foggy views were made clear by the truth. Psalm 1, for instance, is his perspective about what? The righteous and the wicked contrasted. "How blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked." The wicked are not so, but are like the chaff that the wind drives away. Contrasting the wicked and the righteous.

So, how to view the Christian's journey on earth, and what God has promised each of us. Psalm 84 is not one of those songs of ascent (120 through 134) that are known as the pilgrim psalms, but it still speaks to us of David's journey, his experience, and of every believer's journey - you and I as Christians, of what's true of us, what's true for us, what we're going to experience, and what God has promised us. Most of the psalms show us a wide range of human experience and emotions. They show us the need of daily grace and mercy. Many examples of how to pray, what to pray. How to praise God and how to trust Him more and more.

So, let's look at Psalm 84 where we see perspective, pilgrimage, and promises. The psalm begins with perspective. Verse 1, "How lovely is Your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts!" This is not a question. It's an observation. It's his perspective - the psalmist's perspective about the loveliness of God's dwelling place. The loveliness of God's tabernacle. The beauty of the dwelling place of the Lord. The courts of the Lord. The house of God.

And in the New Testament, of course, this represents what? The church. The people of God. Peter makes it clear that we are Zion; we are the temple of God, the spiritual house as Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:22, that we are the habitation of God, through the Holy Spirit. So the church really - looking back on Psalm 84 through new covenant eyes, through New Testament lenses, we see the church here in our journey. And so, Christ in that Zion, is the Chief Cornerstone of God's people. So the perspective of the psalmist is, and let's apply it to the church - the body of Christ - the courts of the Lord are lovely and beautiful.

As a Christian, is that how you see Christ's church and Christ's body? There's a lot of negativity because there are wrinkles and warts and problems and blemishes and needs and weaknesses and sin and failure and disappointment and heartache and you could come up with 50 more words, couldn't you? That's there. But the Lord Jesus Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her. And Ephesians 5 says He's in the process of sanctifying and cleansing her with the washing of the water of the Word. He's carrying out that purpose. He's building His church. So here, David, with all of his failure and imperfections, seeing the people of God in the Old Testament, has this perspective by faith. The courts of the Lord are lovely and beautiful. "How lovely is Your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts!" That's perspective. That's how you view the church.

Also, you see perspective in v. 10. Look down there. Here's perspective. One day, Lord, in Your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. Think about that. One day is better. It's better to be a Christian than to be a lost millionaire. It's better to be a believer unknown in a church - you're loving the Lord, you're living your life, you're not known, you have no reputation, you don't have a big bank account... it is better to be a Christian than to be anyone in this world who's not a believer. David says one day in Your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. If you're here today and you're a Christian, no matter what your struggles are, no matter what your need is, no matter how much you're hurting, or how much difficulty you're going through, everything about your life is better than the lost person around you. Your condition is better. Your present life is better. Your friends are better. Your family is better, because you're a believer. Your identity, your inheritance, your future is better. A poor, financially broke believer, is better off than the wealthiest infidel. I would rather be with my church on a Sunday than on a month-long cruise with a bunch of wicked people in Hawaii or the Bahamas or Alaska, where you can have 8 meals a day, you can order a pizza at midnight, you could get the finest bottle of wine you want, and you stand around and sit around hearing wicked, vain, wealthy people brag about everything. Oh, the edification that would come from that. One day I'd rather be with Christians, than a world cruise. Perspective.

How's your perspective about the church of Jesus Christ shaping up? And this pilgrimage you're on? Beloved, how we view things and what we believe and how we see things is all important, because how you view things is how you're going to respond in the hardest times of life when there's trials and heartaches and disappointment. Another thing the psalmist

said, think about this: Not here, but another psalm that comes to my mind, "Lord, Your steadfast love is better than life." That's perspective. And we say it by faith. This is all about viewing things with reality and in a right way.

The Bible says in another place, "A little that a righteous man has is better than the riches of many wicked people." Now think about that. Stack them up. I heard one guy, a young man just exceeded Bill Gates as the wealthiest man in the world. Stack up the wealthy guys. I could name them. I won't. You know the names. The Bible says a little bit that a righteous person has is better than the riches of many wicked people. Does this world believe that? Not for a second. Is that what Scripture says? Yes, and that's the right perspective to have.

Beloved, our perspective is very, very important. David sees the people of God and his place among them as lovely and all important. More desirable than anything under the sun. The kingdom of God is better. The Gospel is more lovely. The Word of God is more desirable. The people of God are more beautiful and more of a treasure than anything else you have in this world - your house, your future, extended family that aren't Christians... The people of God are more glorious and lovely than all the world has to offer. And then look at v. 3 here. It's quite an amazing statement. The psalmist begins to speak about birds. Why would he do this? "Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself." Two birds. Did Jesus talk about birds sometimes? Yeah. Behold the fowls of the air. Not even a sparrow can fall to the ground, without what? Your Father being there.

A few months ago, we left our garage door open, I guess, too much, and a bird built a nest in a bicycle helmet that was hanging from a closet door in our garage. And I just wanted to clear it out. My wife, being more sanctified - "the righteous one regards the life of the beast" - she said, no honey, leave it alone. So, after awhile, we'd see these little heads peeking up, waiting on food. We had to leave our garage open all day, but shut it at bedtime finally. And so these birds, we had to treat them right. We had to care for them. Why would David speak about birds here? "The sparrows find a home and the swallow finds a nest for herself where she may lay her young." Where does it say? At Your altars, O Lord. That's quite amazing.

Why would God say that? Because if God would even care for the birds, of how much more value are you? Even the smallest, most seemingly insignificant, weakest Christian in the kingdom, in the church, in the house of the Lord, has special significance and love from the Father. That's why that's there. Even the swallows, even the sparrows. Now if a crow builds a nest in my garage, I don't know what I'll do. But beloved, if the birds of the air are noticed by the Father and not one can fall to the ground without Him? Jesus said of how much more value are you than they? This is perspective.

Well, let's move on quickly. Second, we see, not only the pilgrim's perspective, but pilgrimage realities. What do I mean by that? Look at v. 2. Spiritual realities, spiritual experience. Brother Don, last night, used the word experiential. Experiential - it's the same idea. Experiencing God. Truth going from our brains and our minds and our intellect, to get into our heart, to get into our conscience, to shape our thinking, to shape our hands and our feet and our tongue, in all of life. Pilgrimage realities. Look at v. 2. The psalmist says, "My soul longs..." Well, it's even more than longing. It's achingly fainting for it. Acute desire is what's pictured here. "My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord." Not only does the psalmist see the church as lovely, he longs for the people of God.

I grew up as a non-Christian. My parents died by the time I was 8. My cousin raised me. I was in church, and it was absolutely boring. Until God saved me when I was 19. And the most boring day of the week, became the most exciting day of the week. I often wake up on Sundays - now usually Linda's busy with responsibilities, so she may not feel this way all the time, but she does feel this way over the long haul. I have this thought in my mind. Whether I'm preaching that day or not: I get to be with the saints today. I get to be in church. I get to worship God. What a privilege! And beloved, when you don't have a church, you feel that. And so, here, David says, my soul longs and faints for the courts of the Lord.

Do we not only see the church properly, but do we love our church and treasure what we have? This spiritual desire that's in his heart, he says my soul longs and faints with desire. It reminds me of Psalm 63 or Psalm 42. As the deer pants for the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God. Now look at v. 5. He says, "in whose heart are the ways to Zion." Every believer has planted within his heart in the moment of regeneration the highway to Zion. The pathway of the Christian is planted in your heart; where you want to walk in the ways of God. Where you want to follow the Lord. The path of the upright. The paths of the Lord. And you long to walk in obedience. You want to follow Christ. Revelation says they follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

So, the Christian has in his heart the ways to Zion. The Christian longs for and desires the things of God. This is a pilgrim's way. That's what a true Christian is like. How do you know if you're a Christian? As Paul Washer once said, probably a thousand times, do the things you once hated - the things of God - do you now love? The things you once loved - sin and worldliness - do you now hate and not want it anymore? The church of Jesus Christ that you would have never been interested in, before conversion, is it now the people of God you want to be with? Nobody can keep you away? Listen, if persecution ravishes America, and it becomes illegal to be a recognized church in America, and it becomes illegal to speak the name of Jesus, the church will be underground. It will thrive. Caesar's not controlling this thing. Christ will build His church. And the kingdom will go on. And the believers will find other believers to meet with. It will happen automatically. The Christian wants to be with the children of God. Blessed are those who dwell in Your house ever singing Your praises.

A Christian, in his heart, loves fellowship. Loves true preaching, loves the things of Christ. Longs for the things of Zion. As John Newton said in one hymn, "fading is the worldling's pleasure, all his boasted pomp and show, solid joys and lasting treasures, none but Zion's children know." Ever longing, the psalmist says. Ever singing. Now, singing - the word in English is not here, verse 2: my soul longs and faints. In the ESV it says, "My heart and flesh sing for joy." Some translations don't have the word sing. But the ESV has it in v. 2 and v. 4. But it's the idea in Hebrew of we cry out. We cry out in prayer. We cry out in praise to God.

This includes singing. Christians are the only ones in the world that have anything to sing about. Now, Hollywood sings. And the music of this world is always ramping it up, right? But they don't know that they don't have anything really to sing about. It's not lasting joys. It's not true reality. But the Christian longs to praise God, longs to sing praises to God. Why do we sing? Why do we sing each session here? Singing is so important in worship. The previous Republican and Democratic Conventions, I don't think they were singing were they? I mean,

why at Apple's headquarters, at their staff meetings, will they not sing? Toyota, IBM, Starbucks - they won't be singing at their shareholder's annual meetings.

Why? Christians are the only ones who truly sing about things, because they're the only ones that have things to sing about. Do you sing privately? Do you make melody in your heart? When you come to worship, are you mediocre and kind of half laying out on the singing, waiting for the sermon? Be engaged. Ever longing, ever singing, ever praising God in our pilgrimage. "Blessed are those who dwell in Your house." Verse 4 "...ever singing Your praise." You may not be able to preach or teach or have some outward gift that someone sees, but if you as a believer bring your heart to worship, and you say I am going to sing from my heart to the Lord, I'm going to sing in worship, I'm going to lift up my voice and focus on Him and sing to Him, that is ministry to Christ.

Now, another reality in v. 5-7, "Blessed are those whose strength is in You, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs. The early rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, and every one of them appears before God." Who passing through... notice that phrase. They go from strength to strength. Every one of them appears before God. Here is perseverance. That's a spiritual reality. True Christians never quit. False Christians stay awhile and fall away. Jesus said he that endures to the end, what? Shall be saved. The true evidence of knowing the Lord is that you go on to know the Lord. That you keep on. That you stick with the stuff. That you're faithful in the things of God. You're dependable. It's a spiritual discipline to press on and keep on. Perseverance. Paul said in one epistle we are kept by the power of God through what? Faith. We keep believing God. This pilgrim in Psalm 84 is pressing on, laying hold. But you know what's going to happen? He's going to come into a valley.

Look at v. 6. "As they go through the Valley of Baca..." What does Baca mean? Somebody tell me? Kenny? Place of weeping. It's a picture of trouble, hardship, anguish, weeping. As this pilgrim comes into a time and a place of weeping and hardship - none of you ever go through that, do you? One dear brother of mine recently said, I think the past year has been the hardest year of my Christian life. I think I'll write a book, "My Worst Year... Now." It won't be a bestseller, will it? We go through this. You have been through, you are going through, or you will go through the Valley of Baca. What do we do? It's a valley of trouble. Notice what it says that the pilgrim does. Not God - the grace is implied. It's hidden in here. Because none of us will go on and persevere without keeping grace and without the regular activity of the Holy Spirit. We know that.

But they make the Valley of Baca a place of springs. This is wonderful. The cry of the pilgrim's heart: I'm pressing on the upward way. New heights I'm gaining every day. Still praying as I onward bound, Lord, plant my feet on higher ground. Ever onward through the Valley of Baca. They turn it into a spring. How do you do that? Perspective. And perseverance. You allow God to take your hardest times to make them a source of blessing, where He, in the midst of your tears, He can dry them. He can refresh you. And He makes it a place of springs where you get refreshing. There's a hymn that says, though my weary steps may falter, and though my soul athirst may be, gushing from the rock before me, lo, a spring of joy I see.

Have you ever had the Lord, in the hardest moment, suddenly, in a moment, with a Scripture, in prayer, He comforts you and He strengthens you, and He reminds you of a truth;

He gives you fresh perspective, He lifts the burden, He gives you peace. That is your Valley of Baca being turned into a place of springs. You and I should ask the Lord, Father, teach me how to make my valley of trouble and my place of weeping a place of springs. Don't waste your sorrows. That's what the pilgrim does.

Well, let's move on. Look at v. 11. Well, before we go to 11, look at v. 7. "They go from strength to strength, each one appears before God." There is eternal security, biblically speaking. Every Christian's going to make it. You're strengthened, you're changed by the Holy Spirit, and He's going to cause you to go from strength to strength to strength to strength - even though there's times of weakness. You don't know from strength to weakness and keep getting weaker. He even causes your weakness ultimately to strengthen you. Every believer goes from strength to strength, growing in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. And every one, the psalmist says, does appear before God. Kept by the power of God. If you're a true believer, regardless of what you're going through, you're kept by Christ, and you will make it. You will appear before God in glory with absolute certainty.

Well, v. 11 brings us into thinking about the pilgrim's promises. V. 11 is a big promise. "For the Lord God is a sun and shield. The Lord bestows favor and honor." The other day I was cast down early in the morning, already feeling some pressures and stresses and discouragement. And a verse I read in the Psalms just came to life. And it's where David said "the Lord is my refuge and strength." And I just stopped. And for a long time, I was chewing the cud. It became life-giving to me. I told the Lord, Lord, You are my refuge, right now. No man is my refuge. Not even my church is my refuge. You are. You've said here, You're my refuge. So be my refuge now. I come to You and I will take my refuge, I'll take my hiding in You. And You are my strength. Strengthen me. That verse became life-giving. These exceeding, great, and precious promises, that the New Testament says, by these we become partakers of the divine nature. Boy, I don't understand that. How can the promises of God when they get in us, cause us increasingly to partake of the divine nature? Peter said that. There's a transformation that goes on. More Christ-likeness. More heavenly perspective. More renewed mind. More mortification of sin. More freedom. More glory and beauty in Christ - we see Him more, and so we're changed into His image more. What an amazing thing!

And this one, "The Lord God is a sun and shield. He will give grace and glory." He will give you as a believer, in your journey, favor and honor. I love praying that verse where it says "The Lord will surround them with favor like a shield." Think of that. When you go on a trip and you have to leave your family, as a man, pray that. Lord, surround my family with favor like a shield. You have unregenerate children out in the world... pray that. Lord, surround him, surround her with favor like a shield. God will answer such prayers. And we don't know how He'll apply it. That's His business. Exceeding great and precious promises. Do we use them? Do we believe them? Do we milk from them? Do we suck from them? All the nourishment and reality we can. They're not there for our information. They're there for our use.

And then notice the next thing v. 11 says at the end. I tell single people this all the time who want to be married. No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly. If it's good for you, He's not going to withhold it from you. When you're ready for marriage, and the person that you're going to marry is ready and He brings you together - no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly. What a promise! And that applies to married people too.

Your future is uncertain? No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly. The promises of God are ours.

Like Psalm 25, "The meek will He guide in true judgment, and the humble, He will show their path." Psalm 32, "Steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts the Lord." Psalm 34, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him through all of them." Psalm 59: "You are the Lord, You are the God who shows me steadfast love." Romans 15, I love this one, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace through believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope."

God is able. He's able to do what? He's able to make all grace abound toward you that you, having all sufficiency in all things, may abound. And Philippians 1:6. "He who began a good work in you..." Has He? Maybe He did for you 40 years ago. Maybe a month ago. It doesn't matter. "He who began a good work in you..." will what? Complete it and perfect it until the very day of Jesus Christ. Faithful is He Who calls you Who also will do it. Finally, we have here a forgotten beatitude. The pilgrim's perspective, pilgrim realities, pilgrim promises, and here, v. 12, all that I can call it is the pilgrim's forgotten beatitude. "O Lord of Hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in You." The blessedness. The beatitudes. There's many beatitudes beyond the Sermon on the Mount, right? Vance Havner, I love to quote. Blessed is he who's not offended in Me. Jesus said that. Blessed is he who is not offended in Me. Vance Havner said that really means blessed is the one who doesn't get cantankerous and upset and mad about how I run My kingdom. Blessed is he or she who's not offended in Me. Well, here, blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord. Everything in the Christian life is a life of faith. When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word, what a glory He sheds on our way. As we do His good will, He abides with us still, and for all who will trust and obey.

Leonard Ravenhill said you better trust and obey or you'll rust and decay. You've got one of two choices. Trust and obey, right? This perspective, this pilgrimage, these promises are ours. And the great reality is we are marching to Zion. I love to sing that hymn. We're marching to Zion. And one stanza says the hill of Zion yields a thousand sacred sweets. Before we reach the heavenly field or walk the streets of gold. Beloved, you are a dear pilgrim.

To quote Alistair Begg, "Dear ones..." I love it when I hear him say that. Dear ones, you are a pilgrim in your journey for a brief window of time on your way to Zion. Get your perspective right on everything kingdom-wise. Experience realities in the Christian life of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Feed on the promises of God. See yourself as a blessed one, because you trust in the Lord. We're all going to make it if we know and love Christ. And you are among those who will.

Let's pray. Father, this psalm really is life giving. I pray that You would quicken it to our hearts, and that this day, we would take it from this place and draw from it as a well, more of the water of life that's there. That we would treat it, Lord, as a banqueting table that's been set before us. And that we would chew on it, and bring it up again. Lord, we pray that You'd seal the truth of it in our hearts. Let it bear real fruit by your Holy Spirit. And guard the Word, we pray. Guard the seed, that the enemy wouldn't steal it, that it wouldn't fall on shallow or rocky ground, but in the good soil in our hearts and bring forth fruit, -fold. Blessed be Your name, Lord, for your Word. Amen.