

“HAVING THE HIGHWAYS TO ZION IN YOUR HEART”

**I. Introduction**

- A. Psalm 84 is a song expressing a longing to return to the temple, that great structure that was built on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.
1. But this is not just a sentimental longing for a place that holds fond memories for the psalmist.
  2. It is a longing for communion with God, the longing that God planted in man’s heart at creation.
  3. Augustine of Hippo famously spoke of this longing at the beginning of his spiritual autobiography *Confessions*, where he prayed, “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”
  4. Augustine’s restless heart finally found rest in God when he received Christ as he is offered in the gospel.
  5. Every believer experiences this rest.
  6. At the same time, trusting in Christ does not take away the sense of longing for God.
  7. After all, the writer of Psalm 84 was a believer, yet he says that his soul longs, even faints, for the courts of the Lord.
  8. His longing for Zion is a picture of the believer’s longing for heaven, the only place where we will be made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.
- B. Psalm 84 contains three benedictions that summarize the three sections of the psalm.

1. Verse 4 says, "Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise!"
2. Verse 5 says, "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion."
3. And verse 12 says, "O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you."
4. As we study this psalm this morning, we will consider what it teaches us about those whose hearts are oriented towards Zion.

## II. Zion as Your Source of Delight

- A. We begin by looking at verses 1-4, where Zion is spoken of as a source of delight.
  1. This theme is set forth right away, as the psalmist opens by declaring, "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!"
  2. C.S. Lewis describes this attitude as having an "appetite for God."
  3. We should note how this appetite is expressed in this psalm.
  4. It is almost the opposite of what is assumed by many Christians in our day.
  5. For contemporary Christians, communion with God is often sought by turning inward, by focusing on emotions and personal experiences.
  6. Even though people may still seek what they refer to as a "worship experience," whether at church or at a Christian music festival or someplace else, these things are treated as stimulants to create a certain kind of feeling.
  7. That inner feeling is what is associated with the presence and blessing of God.

- B. This is not the perspective of the writer of Psalm 84.
1. To be sure, his longing for God's house suggests that he experienced intense emotions during his previous occasions of worshipping there.
  2. But those inward emotions were the product, not the essence, of his worship.
  3. He does not express his longing for God by saying that he wants to produce a certain kind of feeling inside himself.
  4. His focus is on something that is outside of himself.
  5. He delights in the courts of the Lord.
  6. He seeks communion with God through the worship that God instituted as the means by which his people could draw near to him.
- C. Under most of the Old Testament administration of the covenant of grace, the central sanctuary was God's appointed place of worship.
1. At first it was the tabernacle, and later it was the temple.
  2. Though individual believers certainly had personal communion with God through the indwelling Holy Spirit, they assembled in God's presence at the sanctuary, especially for the great pilgrim feasts.
  3. And at the local level, they assembled for worship in their synagogues every Sabbath day.
  4. Under the New Testament administration of the covenant of grace, the church is God's temple.
  5. As Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman in John 4, this means that public worship has now been decentralized.

6. But this does not mean that worship has been privatized.
  7. We are still instructed to assemble for public worship.
  8. When the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews exhorted Christians to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,” he added this command: “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 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.” (Heb. 10:23-25)
  9. God still calls his people to meet with him in covenant assembly.
  10. Of course, God’s presence is not confined to public worship.
  11. We can draw near to the throne of grace anywhere and anytime.
  12. But public worship is the ordinary means that God uses to draw us to himself and to build us up in our faith.
  13. As John Calvin points out, “when we consider that the sluggishness of our flesh hinders us from elevating our minds to the height of the divine majesty, in vain would God call us to himself, did he not at the same time, on his part, come down to us; or, did he not at least, by the [provision] of means, stretch out his hand to us, so to speak, in order to lift us up to himself.”
- D. As the psalmist continues to express his delight in God’s courts in this first section, he is reminded of something that he noticed on previous visits to the temple.
1. Henry and I saw something similar to this during one of our multiple trips to Lowe’s this past week.
  2. As we were walking down one of the aisles, we noticed a loud chirping sound from up in the rafters.

3. When we looked up, we saw that a bird had flown in through those large doors that the store keeps open this time of year.
4. This is similar to what the psalmist is talking about in verse 3.
5. The courtyards of the temple were open to the sky and were thus accessible to birds.
6. The temple eaves would have provided good nesting places, so it is not surprising that birds would make their homes there.
7. As the psalmist thinks about this, he sees it as a fitting picture of the blessedness of dwelling in the presence of God.
8. This is an illustration of the spiritual reality that we enjoy as Christians.
9. Through faith in Christ we have taken refuge in God.
10. We dwell in his house.
11. The only fitting response to such a blessing is to devote our lives to his praise.

### III. Zion as Your Source of Strength

- A. We turn now to the second section of our psalm, which begins in verse 5.
  1. Here the focus is upon Zion as our source of strength.
  2. The psalmist says that those who have communion with God have the highways to Zion in their heart.
  3. This brings to mind the image of pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem for the great feasts.
  4. Though God's law obligated his people to make that journey, true believers delighted in doing so.

5. The highways to Zion were not merely the roads upon which they traveled.
  6. The highways were in their hearts.
  7. This is another picture of the longing that a believer has for fellowship with God.
  8. Everything else in life is to be counted as loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ and being found in him.
- B. It is possible that verse 5 also indicates that when the psalmist wrote this psalm he was prevented from going to the sanctuary due to forces that were beyond his control.
1. His heart was oriented toward Zion, but he was providentially hindered from going there.
  2. We will have more to say about the evidence in support of this when we consider verses 8 and 9.
  3. For now, the thing to notice is that because a believer's heart is oriented towards God, the strength that he receives from God enables him to persevere through times of difficulty.
  4. This is what is meant when it says in verse 6, "As they go through the Valley of Baca they make it a place of springs."
  5. What is the Valley of Baca?
  6. Well, there is no evidence of an actual valley that was known by this name, so it is probably meant to be understood figuratively.
  7. The term Baca sounds like the Hebrew verb "to weep."
  8. It is also thought that this term refers to a shrub that grows in arid places.

9. Both possibilities point to the same general idea.
  10. As believers, our pilgrimage through this world sometimes involves passing through dry times and sad times.
  11. Yet because of the strength that we receive from the Lord, we are not overwhelmed by these things.
  12. We are able to face them with joy because we know that God is with us.
  13. While we do not rejoice in the trials and sorrows themselves, we rejoice in the Lord as we go through them.
  14. Our trust in God's providence even brings about a transformation in our perspective on these things.
  15. We make the Valley of Baca into a place of springs.
- C. Verse 7 continues to develop the idea of pilgrimage by saying that as believers make their way to Zion "They go from strength to strength."
1. In other words, they are continually acquiring fresh strength in their pilgrimage.
  2. Because we are united to Christ by faith, our lives are tethered to him in his glorified heavenly existence.
  3. As Paul says in Colossians 3, our lives are hid with Christ in God.
  4. Here is how Geerhardus Vos expresses this: "Though as yet a pilgrim, the Christian is never wholly separated from the land of promise. His tents are pitched in close view of the city of God. Heaven is present to the believer's experience in no less real a sense than Canaan with its fair hills and valleys lay close to the vision of Abraham. He walks in the light of the heavenly world and is made acquainted with the kindred spirits inhabiting it... The roots of a Christian's life are fed from those rich and perennial springs that lie deep in the recesses of converse with God, where prayers ascend

and divine graces descend, so that after each [conference] he issues, a new man, from the [tent of meeting]." [Vos, *Grace and Glory*, 146]

5. The Lord supplies us with new strength for our pilgrimage through his Word, through the sacraments, and through prayer.
- D. I noted earlier that verses 8 and 9 suggest that the psalmist was in a situation that prevented him from making the journey to Zion.
1. The plea in verse 8 for God to hear his prayer gives the impression that he is experiencing some kind of distress or crisis.
  2. And the plea in verse 9 for God to look on the face of his anointed may provide a clue as to the nature of this crisis.
  3. It is possible that the psalmist was with David on one of the occasions when he was living in exile, perhaps when Absalom tried to seize the throne.
  4. As the Lord's anointed, Israel's king was the symbol of God's reign in the midst of his people.
  5. This is why he is referred to by the psalmist as "our shield."
  6. You may know that the Hebrew word "anointed" is Messiah, which is translated in Greek as Christ.
  7. David and Israel's other kings were types of Christ.
  8. When the psalmist cried out to God in a time of crisis, he looked for deliverance through the Lord's anointed.
  9. In the same way, we should seek God's help and comfort through Christ, trusting that all of God's promises find their 'Yes' and 'Amen' in him.

#### IV. Zion as Your Source of Favor



- A. This brings us to the third and final section of Psalm 84, which begins in verse 10.
1. Here the emphasis is upon Zion as our source of favor.
  2. As the psalmist reflects upon this, he makes this assertion: "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."
  3. Though there are many pleasures to be found in this world, they all pale in comparison with the pleasure of being in the presence of the Lord.
  4. Having the least place in God's kingdom is infinitely better than the most luxurious things the world can offer.
  5. God is even better than life itself, because life has no meaning apart from him.
  6. While it is natural for people to want their life in this world to be long and enjoyable, the sad irony is that as long as they remain alienated from God they will go through life with an insatiable restlessness.
- B. The favor that the Lord bestows upon those who live in communion with him is described in several ways in verse 11.
1. First, God is said to be "a sun and shield."
  2. As a sun, the Lord is our source of light and life.
  3. As a shield, he is our source of protection and security.
- C. God is also said to bestow favor and honor.
1. These terms are better translated as "grace and glory."

2. Grace is the favor that God lavishes upon us in Christ when what we deserve is condemnation.
  3. And glory is the hope of heaven, the hope of being forever freed from sin, suffering, sadness, and death, the hope of entering into the fullness of joy that consists in living in the presence of God.
- D. The psalmist also says that God will not withhold any good thing from those who walk uprightly.
1. This does not mean that we can merit God's favor by living upright lives.
  2. It is simply expressing that those who have been brought into communion with God will strive to walk in his ways.
  3. Because God is our Father, we want to please him.
  4. And because we have God as our Father, we can be confident that he will provide us with all that we need in order to continue on in our pilgrimage to heavenly Zion.
  5. As Paul points out in Romans 8, if God "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

## V. Conclusion

- A. The longing for God that is expressed in Psalm 84 stands in sharp contrast to the futile quest of so many in this world, who are trying to fill the God-shaped vacuum in their hearts with something other than God.
- B. This psalm is the cry of a heart that God has renewed and drawn into fellowship with himself.
- C. And because God is the one who creates and directs this longing, we can be confident that it will one day be fully satisfied.

- D. If the highways to Zion are in your heart, then a day is coming when you will appear before God in Zion, and the light of his face will shine upon you in all its glory for all eternity.