

# “No Good Thing Does He Withhold ”

## A Sermon on Psalm 84

*Texts: Psalm 84:1-12; Philippians 3:1-11*

---

In many places, the Bible speaks of the Christian life as a pilgrimage. Paul describes the Christian life in terms of enduring this present evil age as we make our way to the glorious inheritance which is ours in the age to come (cf. Galatians 1:4, Ephesians 1:21). When our Lord Jesus calls and instructs his disciples, he uses images drawn from Israel's Exodus from Egypt, in which Jesus promises that he will lead us from the bondage of the guilt and power of sin, into the promised land, which is our Sabbath rest in the presence of God. The Bible also tells us that we are citizens of two kingdoms—the city of man, and the heavenly kingdom. We live in the one, all the while we long for the other. When U2's Bono cries out “I still haven't found what I'm looking for,” there's something in us cries out right along with him. As God's people, we long for God's presence and favor. This is our hope and the realization of our heavenly citizenship. This gives meaning and purpose to our lives as we make our way towards our goal and final destination. The problem isn't that we haven't found what we are looking for—we have. The problem is that we won't fully receive what we have found until we come to the end of our pilgrimage, and we are not there yet. This is why the biblical writers can depict the struggles of the Christian life as a journey of sorts, as we make our way to that place for which we so eagerly long.

We continue our series on select Psalms and we now take up Psalm 84 which is attributed to the Sons of Korah. This Psalm is found in the third book of the Psalter and describes a pilgrimage to city of Jerusalem to worship YHWH in his temple. Although the pilgrim motif takes many different forms in the Scriptures, one way it is depicted is in terms of a longing for fellowship with the living God. In the Old Testament we find this longing expressed by many of Israel's prophets. During that period of redemptive history from the time of Israel's release from captivity in Egypt to the forty years of wandering throughout the wilderness of the Sinai, the people of God long to enter the promised land of Canaan—for them a new Eden of sorts. During the era of Joshua and the Judges, and then throughout the period of the united kingdom of Saul, David, and Solomon, God's people desire to worship God in his temple, which they see as the visible sign of YHWH's presence in the midst of his people. But once the kingdom is divided and Israel's fortunes become bleak, God's people find themselves longing for deliverance from the apostasy of the people, and from the wickedness of their religious leaders. The people of Israel long for deliverance from their enemies, and for that time when Israel will once again live in peace, safety, and prosperity. It is not accidental that messianic prophecy flourishes during this time, as God's people increasingly long for their promised Messiah.

In the New Testament, this same longing for God's presence and his blessing takes a strikingly different form. With the coming of Jesus Christ, the biblical focus shifts away from the letter of the law written on two stone tablets, to the Holy Spirit. The focus shifts away from a building where God resides (the temple) to the church in which his Spirit indwells. It shifts away from fruitful vineyards, fields, and orchards (material blessing) toward heavenly blessings, and it shifts away from dwelling in the land in peace and safety (Canaan), to union with Jesus of Nazareth (the true Israel). As Paul puts it in Galatians 4:4, now that the fullness of time has come, Jesus stepped out of the type and shadow of the Old Testament, fulfilling all of God's promises. With the dawn of the messianic age, it is clear that Jesus is the true Israel and that we are his people. This is why in Matthew 12:6, Jesus says of himself, “*I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.*”

With the coming of Jesus (and the change in focus from anticipation to fulfillment), God draws near to us, his people. In Jesus Christ, God's righteousness and salvation come to sinful men and women. Through faith we take hold of God's promise that all of these blessings are now ours in Christ. Yet we also know that these blessings will not be fully realized until Jesus returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. Until that great day dawns, we continue our pilgrimage to the promised land. This is why the Christian life and all of its struggles can be depicted as journey, as those who are trusting in Christ are pilgrims making our journey to that good land which God has promised, and where at long last, we will enter our rest. In light of this prominent biblical theme, a number of Reformed theologians have spoken of Christian theology in terms of a theology of pilgrims (*theologia viatorum*).<sup>1</sup>

Longing for the presence and blessing of God is the theme of our two texts this morning, Psalm 84 and Philippians 3. The author of Psalm 84 (one of the Sons of Korah) vividly describes how he longs to be in God's temple, because that is where God is present. As he contemplates these things, it brings him great joy and stirs a powerful longing to be in the presence of the Lord.

The Sons of Korah have an interesting history. Originally, the Korahites were expert warriors, often assigned the task of guarding the campsites where God's people resided as they moved throughout the wilderness of the Sinai desert. Later on, the Korahites assumed the more specialized duty of guarding the threshold of the tent of meeting. By the time of Solomon's temple, the Sons of Korah—much like the sons of Asaph—were a guild of musicians who were devoted to the craft of composing sacred song.<sup>2</sup> In fact, twelve Psalms are attributed to these Sons of Korah.

The unknown author of the 84<sup>th</sup> Psalm writes like a homesick man. He is eager to return to that place for which his heart desires. He can't wait to arrive at the place where YHWH is present. Three times in the Psalm, the author will speak of the blessedness—in fact, he pronounces a blessing upon his reader—of being near that place where God dwells in the midst of his people. The author's entire focus in this Psalm is upon being in that place where he will enjoy the presence of the living God.

**P**salm 84 is divided into three stanzas. In the first stanza—verses one through four—the author expresses his longing in terms of a journey to a distant home, as he describes the emotions of a man who is far away from that place where his true affections are directed.

In verse 1, the Psalmist describes the temple of God as “lovely,” or more literally as “dear or beloved.” “*How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!*” The language used here is that typical of love poetry,<sup>3</sup> and recalls to mind prominent themes found in other Psalms of the Sons of Korah, namely Psalm 42:4, where it is written, “*these things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival.*” The unknown author of this Psalm obviously delights in fulfilling his role as a musician in Solomon's temple, the place where God dwells. His mind is full of memories of the grand processional as the people make their way to the temple, a time of great joy, and thanksgiving. He can't wait to see the grand procession go up to the house of the Lord just one more time.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 1 (Baker, 2003), 259.

<sup>2</sup> See *ISBE*, Vol. 3.51

<sup>3</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 303.

Contrast this with the greater light of the New Testament. The temple where God dwells is composed of living stones, his redeemed people, who are now described as the mystical body of Jesus Christ, which is his church. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 3:16, “*Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?*” The Psalmist delights in God’s temple, for that is where God is present with his people. The New Testament equivalent of the Psalmist’s desire to be in the temple, is the delight we feel when we assemble together with our brothers and sisters to worship the Triune God, since together, we are individually and collectively are Christ’s temple, the dwelling place of the blessed Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

The very thought of the dwelling place of the Lord stirs the heart of the Psalmist. In verse 2 he writes, “*My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.*” But make no mistake about it, it is not the Psalmist’s attachment to a building—the stone and mortar—that stirs his soul. The living God is the object of his longing. The author longs for the temple courts because God himself is present there. In fact, the providential care that God has for his creatures—evident in the temple itself—stirs his heart all the more. “*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.*” By nesting in the eaves of the temple, the lowly sparrow enjoys the blessing of God’s presence, the very thing the Psalmist desires. A king who knows not YHWH, yet who lives in a luxurious palace, cannot begin to know the blessedness of the lowly sparrow who has built its nest in the eaves of the temple.

In verse 4 we come to the first of the three so-called beatitudes in the Psalm, “*blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise!*” In contrast to the wandering exile, who longs to be home but who cannot, the Psalmist pronounces a blessing upon those who, like the sparrow, reside where the living God resides, and who are continually near the presence of the LORD God. They are able to praise God in his temple whenever they wish. This is the very thing the exile voice speaking in this Psalm longs to do, but cannot.

**I**n the second stanza of Psalm 84, verses 5-8, the author speaks of his longing in terms of a journey. The Psalmist is a man making a pilgrimage to his favorite place on earth.

The second beatitude [blessing] opens the second stanza in verse 5, “*blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.*” Whether the Psalmist is speaking as one who actually must make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, or whether he is speaking of his own longing for the presence of God in the terms of a journey, is not clear. In fact, the pilgrimage spoken of here is based upon a word with a double-meaning. It may either refer to a raised highway used by the pilgrim to make his way to Jerusalem, or it may refer to the raised path used by those who are in the processional going up to the temple. It may even refer to the music “raised up to God” in worship.<sup>5</sup> But the key point is that the journey to God’s temple, whether literal or figurative, follows a well-known and frequently trodden path. For many for us, the Psalter (the Book of Psalms) itself is such a highway to God. God’s own word of praise shows us the way to that which we desire the most, the blessing and favor of our God.

As one makes the journey home, the landmarks they pass on the way remind them that the distance from home is decreasing with every step they take. “*As they go through the Valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.*” The Valley of Baca was named for a shrub

---

<sup>4</sup> Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 303.

<sup>5</sup> Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 304.

which thrives in arid places, and was often a landmark indicating a nearby spring. Even a barren place (a Valley of Baca) can be a place of refreshment, as God may choose to send autumn rains which bring the barren desert to life. The Hebrew word for “pool” has exactly the same consonants as the word for “blessings.” The idea is that the soul longs for God because the presence of God turns barren places into green valleys.<sup>6</sup> Just as rain renews creation, so too being in the presence of YHWH renews the Psalmist’s soul.

The nearer the pilgrim gets to home, the stronger he feels the pull. Instead of tiring and giving up, the eager pilgrim actually gathers strength at the very thought that he is nearing his destination. Says the Psalmist, “*they go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion.*” The closer he gets to his goal, the faster the pilgrim’s pace. The pilgrim longs to be in Zion at the foot of God’s Holy mountain. The very thought of drawing near to God’s temple leads him to cry out with the words of anticipation in verse 8, “*O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob!*” The pilgrim’s prayer will be heard and answered. He knows that God is faithful to his covenant promises, and that God delights in both the prayers, and the praises of his people.

The third stanza, verses 9-12, indicates that the pilgrim has finally reached his destination. His desire to enter the presence of God is now fulfilled. He will hear again the praises offered to YHWH by his people. The Psalmist will join with the happy throng when the Lord bestows his favor on those who seek his presence.

Verse 9 is kind of a parenthesis of sorts—“*behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed!*” Before the Psalmist continues on about the glories of the temple, his train of thought is interrupted as he make a brief entreaty of sorts for the king, who is both the shield and anointed one of Israel. As a gesture of devotion to the king, the Psalmist asks that the same measure of his own pleasure found in being in God’s temple would indeed be upon God’s anointed one (the king) as well.

In verse 10, the Psalmist returns to his original train of thought and makes an amazing declaration: “*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 is the Old Testament equivalent of Paul’s assertion in Philippians 3, when the Apostle declares “*I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*” The one who knows the presence of God would much rather assume the lowliest post in God’s service (a doorkeeper), than feel at home in the company of the wicked. “Tents of wickedness” is a figure of speech connected to the wealth and social status of those merchants who traveled throughout Palestine. Better to be a doorkeeper in God’s house, than be an equal of wealthy pagans with their big tents, but who know not YHWH’s favor and blessing.

Even God’s doorkeepers receive a reward which far transcends anything the pagans can offer. As the Psalmist says in verse 11, “*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.*” God is both the sun (the source of life and joy), as well as a shield to his people (the source of protection, power and deliverance). Once in God’s presence, God bestows both favor and honor upon his people, the Old Testament equivalents of grace and glory in the New. Here, the word “favor” has the sense of God smiling upon his people as he takes

---

<sup>6</sup> Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 305.

delight in the delight that his people express for him,<sup>7</sup> while in the New Testament, honor and glory point toward the resurrection on the final day when the shame and stain of sin is forever removed. The point is that God bestows his blessings upon all of his people as they seek him, just as he will bestow the greater blessings found in Jesus Christ as we assemble to hear God's word and bask in its glorious promises that our sins are forgiven, that we are covered with the perfect righteousness of Christ, and that we will dwell forever in the presence of the Lord.

In fact, says the Psalmist "*no good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly,*" a text which is echoed by Paul in Romans 8:32: "*he who 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?*" In fact, these words from the Psalmist, actually foreshadow the gospel. As we see in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God withholds no good thing from those who trust in him. Although he did not know the name of Jesus, nevertheless, the Psalmist knew this fact to be true. God will give every good thing to those who love and trust him.

But the Psalmist also says that these things come only to those whose walk is blameless, that is, those who walk "uprightly."<sup>8</sup> What does the Psalmist mean by this language of walking in an upright manner? Is he saying that these blessings come only to those without sin? Absolutely! From the perspective of the Psalmist, this upright walk is characteristic of the Old Testament saint who, in faith, looks to God's promise to provide for the forgiveness of sin and a righteousness which can withstand his holy presence. His whole heart believes what God has said, and he longs to see the promise become a reality. As he puts it verse 12, "*O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!*"

From the perspective of the New Testament, the one who's walk is blameless is none other than Jesus Christ. What the Psalmist could not yet see is that God bestows his honor and favor (grace and glory) upon us by reckoning our sins to Christ, and Christ's righteousness to us, so that we are seen as though we had no sin, and as though we had kept the commandments perfectly. We are blameless (we walk "uprightly") because Jesus Christ is without sin, and that through faith we united to him and his "uprightness." Jesus now becomes the object of our favor and desire, just as the Psalmist desires to arrive at the temple where YHWH is present with his people.

It is the knowledge that the Lord blesses the man who trusts in him which stirs the Psalmist's heart, and why as he makes the long journey to the temple, and the closer he gets, the more his strength is renewed. This is why he longs to be in the temple, why he envies the lowly sparrow, and why the very thought of being in the presence of God stirs his heart to such great joy. Indeed, it is better to be a doorman in God's dwelling and receive God's favor, than have status and riches in the palace of the pagans.

**I**n the New Testament that for which the author of Psalm 84 so desperately longed, takes a different direction. Jesus has come to Israel and shown that he is the true temple. Through faith in Jesus Christ, God bestows his grace and glory upon his people. The faithful no longer must seek God's presence in a particular building, for we are God's living temple. No longer must a pilgrim make the journey to Jerusalem on the raised path. For in Jesus Christ, the true temple of God, God is always present with us, and in him, God bestows grace and glory.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 306-307.

<sup>8</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 307.

For the Psalmist, it was better to hold the lowest rank in God's kingdom, than to have status among the pagans. He longs to be where God is found. But for Paul the situation is different. His longing for God's favor and presence drives him not to think of the journey he must make to draw near to God, but rather how God is already near in Jesus Christ. While the Psalmist sees this in terms of it being better to be the doorkeeper in the temple, for Paul, the thought of Christ's righteousness—the ultimate blessing of God's favor and honor, moves him to renounce all confidence in his own accomplishments. Just listen to Paul's words in Philippians 3:1-11, where the apostle writes:

*Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

The Psalmist longs to be in the temple of God. The very thought of being in the presence of the Lord moves him to declare *I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness*. Paul, on the other hand, longs to gain Christ and his righteousness so as to share in the fellowship of his sufferings. The thought of this moves Paul to say: *I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*. Both men (the Psalmist and Paul) desire a similar thing. But Paul saw what the Psalmist couldn't—this desire to be in the presence of the Lord is fulfilled in Jesus Christ who is present with us through his word and sacraments, every time we assemble.

Beloved, let the very thought of Christ's perfect and faultless righteousness satisfy our longing for God's blessing and favor. Like the Psalmist and the apostle, let us delight in God's presence in the person of Jesus Christ as he draws near to us this morning in the power of the Holy Spirit through his word and sacraments. As the Psalmist was excited by the very thought of being in the presence of the Lord, he picks up his pace as he made his way through the Valley of Baca toward the object of his delight. Blessed are each one of us as we make our way each Lord's day to assemble as temple of the living God, to hear yet again that word of God's favor and pardon. Oh, for a day in your courts!

In the person of our Savior Jesus Christ, we have everything the Psalmist so eagerly desired. And yet, we remain pilgrims. As we make the journey to this place each Lord's day because we are God's living temple, may our strength be renewed and may we find the favor and honor of the Lord. We know what the Psalmist knew—*“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!”* And like Paul, we know that the same blessed Lord whose the presence the Psalmist desired above all else, is with us this morning. Beloved, God has smiled upon us in Jesus Christ. He has given his own son for us, for the complete remission of all our sins. And so with our strength renewed and our hearts filled with gratitude, we continue our journey because we know that *no good thing does he withhold* from those who walk uprightly, through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.