

## Psalm 84—Longing for the Courts of the LORD

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*,  
trans. Rev. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), Vol. III, 351-366, emphasis added,  
English updated.

The Psalmist complains that nothing proved to him a source of greater distress than his being prevented from coming to the tabernacle, and his being banished from the assembly of the saints, where God was called upon. And yet he shows, that nothing can withstand the longing desires of the godly; and that, surmounting all obstacles, they will be constantly engaged in seeking God, and, so to speak, will make a way for themselves where there is none. At length he expresses his desire to be restored to the tabernacle of God, and again testifies that a day spent in the tabernacle was in his estimation more to be prized than to live for a long time in the society of unbelievers.

***To the chief musician upon Gittith. A Psalm of the sons of Korah.***

The title of this psalm does not bear the name of David; but as its subject-matter is applicable to him, he was in all probability its author. Some think that it was composed by the sons of Korah, for his particular use; but to prove the groundlessness of this opinion, it is only necessary to refer to this one consideration, that David in his time was so eminently distinguished by the gift of prophecy as to be under no necessity of employing the Levites to perform a service for which he himself was so well qualified. The only difficulty to our ascribing it to David is, that mention is made of mount Zion, to which the ark of the covenant was not brought until he was put in peaceable possession of the kingdom. Now after that, he was never deprived of the liberty of appearing before the ark with others, except once, and then only for a short time; namely, when he was under the necessity of betaking himself to flight on account of the rebellion raised against him by his son Absalom. The contents of the psalm, however, indicate, that at the time of its composition, he had been compelled to wander long in different places as an exile. If we reflect that David recorded in psalms the persecutions he endured under Saul long after he was delivered from them, we will not be surprised to find him making mention of Zion in connection with them. Of the word *Gittith*, I have already spoken on the eighth psalm.

### **PSALM 84:1-4**

**1.** How lovely are Your tabernacles, O LORD of Hosts! **2.** My soul longs [or greatly desires] yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh leap for joy towards the living God. **3.** The sparrow also has found a house for herself, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may place her young ones, O Your altars! O LORD of Hosts! my King, and my God. **4.** Blessed are they who dwell in Your house: they will be ever praising You. Selah.

**1.** *How lovely are Your tabernacles, O LORD of Hosts!* David complains of his being deprived of liberty of access to the Church of God, there to make a profession of his faith, to improve in godliness, and to engage in the divine worship.

Some would understand by the *tabernacles of God*, the kingdom of heaven, as if David mourned over his continuance in this state of earthly pilgrimage; but they do not sufficiently consider the nature of his present afflicted circumstances—that he was debarred from the sanctuary. David knew that God had not in vain appointed the holy assemblies, and that the godly have need of such helps so long as they are sojourners in this world. He was also deeply sensible of his own infirmity; nor was he ignorant how far short he came of approaching the perfection of angels. He had therefore good ground to lament over his being deprived of those means, the usefulness of which is well known to all true believers.

David's attention was, no doubt, directed to the proper end for which the external ritual was appointed; for his character was widely different from that of hypocrites, who, while they frequent the solemn assemblies [church services] with great pomp, and seem to burn with ardent zeal in serving God, yet in all this, aim at nothing more than by an ostentatious display of piety to obtain the credit of having performed their duty towards Him. David's mind was far from being occupied with this gross imagination. The end he had in view in desiring so earnestly to enjoy free access to the sanctuary was that he might there worship God with sincerity of heart and in a spiritual manner.

The opening words are in the form of an exclamation, which is an indication of ardent affection; and this state of feeling is expressed still more fully in the second verse. Hence we learn, that those are sadly deficient in understanding who carelessly neglect God's instituted worship, as if they were able to mount up to heaven by their own unaided efforts.

I have observed, that in the second verse a more than ordinary ardor of desire is expressed. The first verb . . . signifies *vehemently to desire*; but not contented with this word, David adds, that *his soul faints for the courts of the LORD*, which is equivalent to our pining away, when, under the influence of extreme mental emotion, we are in a manner transported out of ourselves.

He speaks only of the *courts* of the tabernacle, because, not being a priest, it was not lawful for him to go beyond the outer court. None but the priests, as is well known, were permitted to enter into the inner sanctuary.

In the close of the verse, he declares, that this longing extended itself even to his body, that is, it manifested itself in the utterance of the mouth, the languor of the eyes, and the action of the hands. **The reason why he longed so intensely to have access to the tabernacle was, to enjoy the living God;** not that he conceived of God as shut up in so narrow a place as was the tent of the ark, but he was convinced of the need he had of steps, by which to rise up to heaven, and knew that **the visible sanctuary served the purpose of a ladder, because, by it the minds of the godly were directed and conducted to the heavenly model** [cf. Hebrews 8:5].

And assuredly, 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 interposition of means, stretch out His hand to us, so to speak, in order to lift us up to Himself.

**3. *The sparrow also has found a house for herself, and the swallow a nest for herself.*** Some read this verse as one continuous sentence, conveying the idea that the birds made their nests near the altars; from which it might the more evidently appear how hard and distressing his condition was in being kept at a distance from them. . . . the prophet, I have no doubt, breaking off in the middle of his sentence all at once, exclaims, that nothing would be more grateful to him than to behold the altar of God.

David then, in the first place, with the view of aggravating the misery of his condition, compares himself with the sparrows and swallows, showing how hard a case it was for the children of Abraham to be driven out of the heritage which had been promised them, while the little birds found some place or another for building their nests. He might sometimes find a comfortable retreat, and might even dwell among unbelievers with some degree of honor and state; but so long as he was deprived of liberty of access to the sanctuary, he seemed to himself to be in a manner banished from the whole world. Undoubtedly, the proper end [purpose] which we ought to propose to ourselves in living, is to be engaged in the service of God.

The manner in which He requires us to serve Him is spiritual; but still **it is necessary for us to make use of those external aids which He has wisely appointed for our observance.** This is the reason why David all at once breaks forth into the exclamation, *O Your altars! O LORD of Hosts!*

Some might be ready to say in reference to his present circumstances, that there were many retreats in the world, where he might live in safety and repose, yes, that there were many who would gladly receive him as a guest under their roof, and that therefore he had no cause to be so greatly distressed. To this he answers, that he would rather relinquish the whole world than continue in a state of exclusion from the holy tabernacle; that he felt no place delightful at a distance from God's altars; and, in short, that no dwelling-place was agreeable to him beyond the limits of the Holy Land.

This he would intimate, by the appellations which he gives to God, *My King, and my God.* In speaking in this manner, he gives us to understand that his life was uncomfortable and embittered, because he was banished from the kingdom of God. "Although all men," as if he had said, "should vie with each other in their eagerness to afford me shelter and entertainment, yet as You are my King, what pleasure would it afford me to live in the world, so long as I am excluded from the territory of the Holy Land? And again, as You are my God, for what end do I live but to seek after You? Now, when You cast me off, should I not despise every place of retreat and shelter which is offered me, however pleasant and delightful it may be to my flesh?"

**4. Blessed are they who dwell in Your house.** Here the Psalmist expresses more distinctly the proper and legitimate use of the sanctuary; and thus he distinguishes himself from hypocrites, who are sedulously attentive to the observance of outward ceremonies, but destitute of genuine heart godliness. David, on the contrary, testifies, that **the true worshippers of God offer to Him the sacrifice of praise,** which can never be dissociated from faith. Never will a man praise God from the heart, unless, relying on His grace, he is a partaker of spiritual peace and joy.

#### **PSALM 84:5-7**

**5.** Blessed is the man whose strength is in You; the ways [to Zion] are in their hearts. **6.** They passing through the valley of weeping, will together make it a fountain; the rain also will cover the cisterns [or reservoirs]. **7.** They will go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

***True humility is a prerequisite for growth in godliness, faith, and true worship.***

**5. Blessed is the man whose strength is in You.** David again informs us, that the purpose for which he desired liberty of access to the sanctuary was, not merely to gratify his eyes with what was to be seen there, but to make progress in faith. **To lean with the whole heart on God, is to attain to no ordinary degree of advancement: and this cannot be attained by any man, unless all his pride is laid prostrate in the dust, and his heart truly humbled.** In proposing to himself this way of seeking God, David's object is to borrow from Him by prayer the strength of which he feels himself to be destitute.

The concluding clause of the verse, *the ways [to Zion] are in their hearts,* is by some interpreted as meaning, That those are happy who walk in the way which God has appointed; for nothing is more injurious to a man than to trust in his own understanding. It is not improperly said of the law, "This is the way, walk ye in it," Isaiah 30:21. Whenever then men turn aside, however little it may be, from the divine law, they go astray, and become entangled in perverse errors. But it is more appropriate to restrict the clause to the scope of the passage, and to understand it as implying, that **those are happy whose highest ambition it is to have God as the guide of their life, and who therefore desire to draw near to Him. God, as we have formerly**

**observed, is not satisfied with mere outward ceremonies. What He desires is, to rule and keep in subjection to Himself all whom He invites to His tabernacle.** Whoever then has learned how great a blessedness it is to rely upon God, will put forth all the desires and faculties of his mind, that with all speed he may hasten to Him.

**6. *They passing through the valley of weeping, will together make it a well.***

The meaning of the Psalmist is, that **no impediments can prevent the enlightened and courageous worshippers of God from making conscience of waiting upon the sanctuary.** By this manner of speaking, he confirms the statement which he had previously made, That **nothing is more desirable than to be daily engaged in the worship of God;** showing, as he does, that no difficulties can put a stop to the ardent longings of the godly, and prevent them from hastening with alacrity, yes, even though their way should be through dry and barren deserts, to meet together to solemnise the holy assemblies.

As the Hebrew word . . . when the final letter is *he*, signifies *tears*, and when the final letter is *aleph*, signifies *a mulberry tree*, some here read *valley of tears*, and others, *valley of the mulberry*. The majority of interpreters adopt the first reading; but the other opinion is not destitute of probability. There is, however, no doubt, that dry and barren deserts are here to be understood, in travelling through which, much difficulty and deprivation must be endured, particularly from the lack of water; drink being of all other things the most necessary to persons when travelling. David intended this as an argument to prove the steadfastness of the godly, whom the scarcity of water, which often discourages travelers from proceeding on their journey, will not hinder from hastening to seek God, though their way should be through sandy and arid valleys.

In these words, **reproof is administered to the slothfulness of those who will not submit to any inconvenience for the sake of being benefited by the service of God.** They indulge themselves in their own ease and pleasures, and allow nothing to interfere with these. They will, therefore, provided they are not required to make any exertion or sacrifice, readily profess themselves to be the servants of God; but they would not give a hair of their head, or make the smallest sacrifice, to obtain the liberty of hearing the gospel preached and of enjoying the sacraments. This slothful spirit, as is evident from daily observation, keeps multitudes fast bound to their nests, so that they cannot bear to forego in any degree their own ease and convenience. Yes, even in those places where they are summoned by the sound of the church-bell to public prayers to hear the doctrine of salvation, or to partake of the holy mysteries, we see that some give themselves to sleep, some think only of gain, some are entangled with the affairs of the world, and others are engaged in their amusements. It is therefore not surprising, if those who live at a distance, and who cannot enjoy these religious services and means of salvation, without making some sacrifice of their worldly substance, remain lolling [dozing] at home. That such may not live secure and self-satisfied in the enjoyment of outward prosperity, David declares, that those who have true heart religion, and who sincerely serve God, direct their steps to the sanctuary of God, not only when the way is easy and cheerful, under the shade and through delightful paths, but also when they must walk through rugged and barren deserts; and that they will rather make for themselves cisterns with immense toil, than be prevented from prosecuting their journey by reason of the drought of the country.

**7. *They will go from strength to strength.*** In this verse the same sentiment is repeated. Mount Zion being the place where, according to the appointment of the law, the holy assemblies were observed, after the ark of the covenant was removed there, it is said, that the people of God will come to Zion in great numbers, provoking one another to this good work. . . .

*They will go from strength to strength* implies that the saints are continually acquiring fresh strength for going up to mount Zion, and continue to prosecute their journey without weariness or fatigue, until they reach the wished-for place, and behold the face of God.

If the word *troop* is preferred, the meaning will be, that not a few only will come, but numerous companies. The manner in which God manifested Himself to His servants in the temple in old time, we have spoken of elsewhere, and especially on the 27th psalm, at the 4th and 5th verses. No visible image of God was there to be seen; but the ark of the covenant was a symbol of His presence, and genuine worshippers found from experience, that by this means they were greatly aided in approaching Him.

#### **PSALM 84:8-11**

**8.** O LORD, God of Hosts! hear my prayer: O God of Jacob! hearken. Selah. **9.** O God! our shield, behold; and look on the face of Your Anointed. **10.** For better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God, than dwell in the tents of wickedness. **11.** For the LORD God is our sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory; He will withhold no good thing from those who walk uprightly. O LORD of Hosts! blessed is the man who trusts in You.

**8.** *O LORD, God of Hosts! hear my prayer.* David, instead of acting like worldly men, who foolishly and unprofitably distress and torment themselves by inwardly cherishing their desires, very wisely directs his wishes and prayers to God. From this it is also evident, that he was not accustomed to indulge in ostentatious boasting, as is the case with many hypocrites, who present to outward appearance a wonderful ardor of zeal, while yet the omniscient eye of God sees nothing but coldness in their hearts.

In the first place, he supplicates in general, that God would vouchsafe [condescend to grant his request] to hear him. He next anticipates a temptation which might very readily arise from his being at present apparently cut off from the Church, and wards it off, by associating and ranking himself with all true believers, under the protection of God. Had he not been a member of the Church, he could not have said generally, and as it were in the person of all its members, *Our shield*. Having made this statement, he uses language still more expressive of high privilege, adducing the royal anointing with which God had honored him by the hand of Samuel, 1 Samuel 16:12.

These words, *Look on the face of Your anointed*, are very emphatic, and yet many interpreters pass over them very frigidly. He encourages himself in the hope of obtaining the favor of God, from the consideration that he had been anointed king in compliance with a divine command. Knowing, however, that his kingdom was merely a shadow and type of something more illustrious, there is no doubt, that in uttering these words, the object which he aspired after was, to obtain the divine favor through the intervention of the Mediator [Christ Jesus] of whom he was a type. I am personally unworthy, as if he had said, that You should restore me, but the anointing by which You have made me a type of the only Redeemer will secure this blessing for me. **We are thus taught, that the only way in which God becomes reconciled to us is through the mediation of Christ, whose presence scatters and dissipates all the dark clouds of our sins.**

**10.** *For better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere.* Unlike the greater part of mankind, who desire to live without knowing why, wishing simply that their life may be prolonged, David here testifies, not only that the end which he proposed to himself in living was to serve God, but that in addition to this, **he set a higher value on one day which he could spend in the divine service, than upon a long time passed among the men of the world, from whose society true religion is banished.**

***True humility is to be preferred over the worldly ambition, pride, and exaltation of false religion and the unbelieving.***

It being lawful for none but the priests to enter into the inner and innermost courts of the temple, David expressly declares, that provided he were permitted to have a place at the porch, he would be contented with this humble station; for the Hebrew word . . . signifies a *door-post*, or the *threshold of a house*. The value which he set on the sanctuary is presented in a very striking light by the comparison, that *he would prefer having a place at the very doors of the temple, to his having full possession of the tents of wickedness*, the plain meaning of which is that **he would rather be cast into a common and unhonored place, provided he were among the people of God, than exalted to the highest rank of honor among unbelievers.** A rare example of godliness indeed!

**Many are to be found who desire to occupy a place in the Church, but such is the sway which ambition has over the minds of men, that very few are content to continue among the number of the common and undistinguished class.** Almost all are carried away with the frantic desire of rising to distinction, and can never think of being at ease until they have attained to some station of eminence.

**11. The LORD God is our sun and shield.** The idea conveyed by the comparison derived from the sun is that **as the sun by his light vivifies, nourishes, and rejoices the world, so the benign countenance [face] of God fills with joy the hearts of His people, or rather, that they neither live nor breathe except in so far as He shines upon them.**

By the term *shield* is meant, that **our salvation, which would otherwise be periled by countless dangers, is in perfect safety under His protection.** The favor of God in communicating life to us would be far from adequate to the exigencies of our condition, unless at the same time, in the midst of so many dangers, He interposed His power as a buckler to defend us.

The sentence immediately succeeding, *He will give grace and glory*, might be viewed as meaning, that those whom God has distinguished by His grace in this world, will at length be crowned with everlasting glory in His heavenly kingdom. But this distinction between grace and glory being, I am afraid, too refined, it will be preferable to explain the sentence as implying, that **after God has once taken the faithful into His favor, He will advance them to high honor, and never cease to enrich them with His blessings.**

This interpretation is confirmed by the following clause, *He will withhold no good thing from those who walk uprightly*, obviously teaching us, that **God's bounty can never be exhausted, but flows without intermission.** We learn from these words, that **whatever excellence may be in us proceeds solely from the grace of God.** They contain, at the same time, this special mark, by which the genuine worshippers of God may be distinguished from others, That their life is framed and regulated according to the principles of strict integrity.

The exclamation with which David concludes the psalm, *Blessed is the man who trusts in You*, seems to refer to the season of his banishment. He had previously described the blessedness of those who dwell in the courts of the Lord, and now he avows, that although he was for a time deprived of that privilege, he was far from being altogether miserable, because he was supported by the best of all consolations, that which arose from beholding from a distance the grace of God.

This is an example well worthy of special attention. So long as we are deprived of God's benefits, we must necessarily groan and be sad in heart. But, that the sense of our distresses may not overwhelm us, we ought to impress it upon our minds, that **even in the midst of our calamities we do not cease to be happy, when faith and patience are in exercise.**