

Psalm 84

The Happiness of the Worshipper

1. Introduction

It's worth noticing the setting of Psalm 84 in the Psalter. Book 3 (Pss. 73–89) is full of laments – the kingdom of Solomon (Ps. 72) has been divided, the northern kingdom has gone into exile (Ps. 80), and the Davidic crown has fallen into the dust (Ps. 89). Psalm 83 recounts a long list of the national enemies of Israel which “conveys well the plight of Israel surrounded by the nations” (D.C. Mitchell) and Psalm 85 prays for restoration (from exile?). In this setting, Psalm 84 (in which the temple still stands and the worship offered in it is received by God with favour) is like an island of peace and composure in a sea of distress and unrest.

Psalm 84 is attributed to “the sons of Korah”. The sons of Korah were a division of the Levitical servants in the temple. 1 Chronicles 9:19 says that the Korahites “were in charge of the work of the service, keepers of the threshold of the tent... keepers of the entrance”, *cf.* Psalm 84:10, “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house my God...” The sons of Korah also played a role in the sung worship in the temple (1 Chron. 6:31-32,37; 2 Chron. 20:19). Twelve psalms are attributed to them (Pss. 42–49, 84–85, 87–88) – assuming that Psalms 42 and 43 are a pair, and that the heading of Psalm 42 applies to Psalm 43.

The Korahites enjoyed regular access to the temple – a privilege which the author of Psalm 84 rates *very* high (“How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!”). However, the psalmist recognizes that this privilege was rare – the vast majority of God’s people lived at a distance from Jerusalem, and their days were consumed by the toil of farming the land. The Psalm is written for them, to reassure them that the LORD God bestows light and protection, favour and honour, every good thing not just on those privileged to live in Zion, but on all who trust and obey.

“On Sunday morning or on Wednesday evening or at some great retreat or camp meeting, believers meet as the living stones of [the] temple and love being in God’s presence. This hour is better than the hundreds of hours in the week. But their calling is to go back to live in the unbelieving world, which operates on a radically different set of principles. They might like to escape that world and live in the bliss of Christian company all the time... but that is not their vocation. But when they are not sure whether they will know God’s protection and blessing in their actual context, they find strength in looking forward to meeting with God in the company of God’s people again. They therefore commit themselves to walking in the world meanwhile in integrity and trust” (John Goldingay).

2. Structure

Of all the psalms which employ the powerful little acclamation “oh how happy!”, only Psalm 84 uses it three times (vv. 4, 5, 12). “Three times [the psalmist] uses this word ‘Blessed’, or ‘Happy’: once wistfully (4), once resolutely (5), once in deep contentment (12). These can guide us in exploring the movement of the psalm” (Kidner).

A (vv. 1-4) *The happiness of the person who dwells in God’s house*

B (vv. 5-7) *The happiness of the person with the way to God’s house in his heart*

C (vv. 8-12) *The happiness of the one who trusts God, at or away from God’s house*

3. Comments

(a) *The happiness of the person who dwells in God’s house*

The translation of the opening exclamation “How lovely!” may mislead because it gives the impression that the psalmist means “how lovely it looks!” when what he actually means is “how loved it is!” The Hebrew word means “beloved” and is plural for the purpose of intensifying the exclamation. Why the emotional attachment (longing, yearning, singing for joy) to the house? Because it is *God’s* house. “*My* King and *my* God” – what matters to the psalmist is not the *place* but the *Person* who lives there.

Note the designation “living God” (*cf.* Ps. 42:2, the first psalm of the sons of Korah). This is a tacit rejection of the “strange and foreign gods” that Israel is admonished by Psalm 81:9 to eschew. In the context of the nations and their “no-gods” the faithful in Israel were fiercely monotheistic – the LORD alone is the living God.

“How happy those who dwell in your house!” – the condition of the temple servants – this rare privilege was not always acknowledged (*cf.* Malachi 1:13; 3:14).

(b) *The happiness of the person with the way to God’s house in his heart*

The “highways” were raised and maintained roads – the way to God’s house was to be kept open for the people of the land – and they were expected to use them, because they had them in their “heart”, i.e. in their mind, they knew the way.

“Valley of Baca” = “valley of balsam trees”, i.e. an arid valley. Also “baca” sounds like the Hebrew for “weeping” – the valley is a place of sorrow. In another play on words, the Hebrew for “pools” sounds like “blessings”. The early rain is the autumn rain, which suggests that this psalm was associated with the feast of Tabernacles, the most joyful of the three annual feasts.

The stanza opens with strength (“blessed are those whose might is in you”) and ends with strength (“they go from strength to strength”). Verse 7b can be translated “The God of gods will be seen in Zion”, which makes an interesting link with the Abrahamic saying, “On the mount of the LORD he will be seen” (Gen. 22:14).

(c) *The happiness of the person who trusts God, at or away from God’s house*

The change of address marks the change of stanza. The psalmist asks God to hear (v. 7) and to see (v. 8). Protection (shield) and favour (“the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you”, Num. 6:25) are the big issues here – and the faithful person’s walk of obedience (v. 11b) and faith (v. 12).

Like Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:42), the psalmist has chosen the “good portion” – in his case standing in the doorway rather than sitting at the Master’s feet, but still in the presence of the LORD – and it will not be taken from him.