

F. Psalm 84 – The Intimacy of Sonship

Sonship in relation to God brings a myriad of benefits and blessings, and thus the children of God are a grateful and ever-praising people. This is expressed in the Psalter as one of its preeminent themes. But another aspect of sonship, which is also front and center in the Psalms, is the matter of intimacy between the Father and His sons and daughters. The Psalms were composed as songs of worship and devotion – songs that expressed and celebrated Israel’s sonship, and as such many of them focused on the singular blessing of Israel’s unique intimacy with the Creator-God. No other people or nation shared this blessing, but Yahweh established this intimacy with Israel with a view to His ultimate goal of having one universal human family taken up in His own life and love. One day, all humanity would share Israel’s intimacy with God.

1. Psalm 84 transitions from the psalms of Asaph (73-83) into the second group of psalms attributed to the “sons of Korah.” The first group is in Book Two (42, 44-49), and the second group consists of psalms 84, 85, 87, 88. Korah was the Levite who led the rebellion against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness (Numbers 16), based on the claim that all of the Israelites were equally holy (consecrated to Yahweh), so that Moses and Aaron had wrongly distinguished themselves in the Lord’s service. Yahweh took Korah’s life, but his descendents, as part of the Kohathites appointed to carry the holy things of the sanctuary (Numbers 3:29-31), continued to serve in the ministration of the tabernacle. Later, David appointed some of the Korahites (“sons of Korah”) as singers in the sanctuary service of worship (1 Chronicles 6:31-38). These Korahites (like Asaph, another appointed singer) apparently composed some of the songs they sang, and among these songs are the psalms ascribed to them in the Psalter.
2. The psalm parallels another Korahite psalm (Psalm 42; cf. also 43) in focusing on Yahweh’s *sanctuary* as the fitting object of delight and longing. But not because of the beauty or excellence of the structure itself, but because it is Yahweh’s dwelling place. By extolling the Lord’s sanctuary, the sons of Korah were extolling Yahweh Himself and the incomparable privilege and delight of being with Him in the place of His habitation. The psalm doesn’t celebrate a place, but a *person*, and specifically the indescribable joy of being in the Lord’s very presence (cf. David’s longing in Psalm 27:4).

In the ancient world, people believed that gods made themselves accessible to humans in temples constructed for their worship. In particular, it was thought that they connected themselves with a physical image representing their likeness. Though the true God fills all creation and doesn’t dwell in a shrine (cf. Isaiah 66:1-2; Acts 17:24), He drew on this notion because of the principle of *sacred space* as the place of divine/human encounter.

People construct sacred sites because they recognize the inherent distinction between the human and the divine and the need to span that distance. Sanctuaries and temples serve that function, acting as a physical intersection of the natural and spiritual realms; a place where heaven and earth come together and human beings can encounter and interact with the divine. So it is with the true God; He is Spirit and Holy Other, and so can only be encountered through some conjunction of His “space” and the human realm, whether by means of a physical location or structure, or through some other form of accommodation to the natural realm, such as a human voice, angelic appearance, etc.

3. The psalmist sets the tone for his song by a joyous eruption of delight as his mind turned to Yahweh's sanctuary (*dwelling places*; v. 1). His use of the plural doesn't contradict the fact of one tabernacle/temple, but recognizes the multiple areas associated with that dwelling place. So the parallelism of verse 2: "*My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the Lord.*" This parallelism also shows that the psalmist's delight and longing regarding Yahweh's sanctuary was actually directed toward Yahweh Himself (v. 2b).

He longed to reside in the place where Yahweh established Himself, enthroned between the wings of the cherubim, and thus noted, perhaps with a hint of envy, the little birds that made their nests in the sanctuary structures (v. 3). Though insignificant compared with human beings, and unaware of the glory of their chosen abode, these creatures experience the blessedness of closeness to their Creator as they live out in His presence the existence He appointed for them. How much more does that blessedness belong to Yahweh's image-children: "*How blessed are those who dwell in Your house! They are ever praising You*" (v. 4). And like the birds who build their nests in the refuge of Yahweh's altars, the humans who dwell in His house – those who have their hearts and lives fully devoted to Him – find Him to be their all-sufficient strength and provision (vv. 5-7).

Here the psalmist drew on the imagery of Israel's festal occasions in which pilgrims made their way up to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh, their King and God. There were three such occasions in Israel's annual calendar: the feasts of *Unleavened Bread* (Passover), *Weeks* (Pentecost), and *Booths* (Deuteronomy 16:16).

- a. In the centuries preceding the exiles of Israel and Judah, the Hebrew pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem from within Canaan, but during the *diaspora* they traveled from vast distances, eventually from the far reaches of the Roman Empire (ref. Acts 2:5-11). But whether coming from near or far, the journey up to Jerusalem was arduous and the pilgrims faced dangers on the road. Nevertheless, the journey was joyous, for it was a pilgrimage of worshippers, children of the Living God traveling to be with Him in the place of His habitation.
- b. The psalmist's language alludes to this actual physical circumstance of difficulty and danger, but with a view to its spiritual counterpart: Though they pass through the "valley of Baca" [i.e., a low place of gloom and tears], the worshippers' ascent to Zion to appear before Yahweh transforms their tears into a spring of blessing in which they go from strength to strength (vv. 6-7).

So Franz Delitzsch observed: "*The most gloomy present becomes bright to them: passing through even a terrible wilderness, they turn it into a place of springs, their joyous hope and the infinite beauty of the goal, which is worth any amount of toil and trouble, afford them enlivening comfort, refreshing strengthening in the midst of the arid steppe.*"

4. This fervent longing and hope led the psalmist to plead with Yahweh, the God of the heavenly hosts and His people Israel, to hear his prayer and answer his longing – *and that in connection with His favor toward His anointed* (vv. 8-10). This plea has led to various conclusions regarding the historical circumstance surrounding the psalm.

- a. First, the psalm gives some impression that Yahweh's sanctuary in Jerusalem stood at that time. If so, and if it's correct that the psalm was composed during the exile, then it must have been penned after the construction of the second temple was completed in 516 B.C. Alternatively, the psalm may have been composed during David's reign after he installed the tabernacle in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6), or during the subsequent centuries while the first temple still stood. Some believe that this psalm was penned at the time David had fled Jerusalem because of Absalom's rebellion. Thus the psalmist's plea expressed his burden to see David (the Lord's "anointed") restored to the throne, and so also his own restoration to Yahweh's sanctuary as one of David's appointed singers.

- b. But whatever the historical circumstance, it seems clear that the psalmist was speaking with a view to the Lord's promise of Zion's future restoration. That is to say, his desire to go up to Zion reflected his greater longing for the promised day when Yahweh would return and again gather His people to Himself, forgiving and cleansing them, and restoring His kingdom and His dwelling among them with the son of David (Yahweh's "anointed") on the throne. This view finds support in the imagery of verses 6-7, and also in the psalmist's twin parallelisms in verse 10: *One day in the courts of Yahweh's sanctuary is better than a thousand elsewhere; thus the writer much preferred even a temporary stay at the threshold leading into Yahweh's house to a settled existence in the dwelling place inhabited by the wicked* (i.e., those who don't know Him).

This comparison indicates that he was using the language of dwelling places to refer to the two "habitations" where people can make their home: They can dwell with Yahweh in His "house," or "outside" with those who are estranged from Him. The psalmist further reinforced this interpretation by describing those who make their dwelling with Yahweh as those who *walk uprightly* and *trust in Him*.

5. And so it seems that the psalmist constructed his imagery to convey his own – and Israel's – longing for the day of ultimate and final pilgrimage – *the day when Yahweh's covenant children will be gathered back to Him and abide in His house forever*. In that day the Lord's image-sons would be like the little birds that built their nests in the refuge of His habitation. And they, too, would flourish in His presence, secure and fully satisfied, as they live out their lives according to His wise and glorious design for them.

"For Yahweh, who is God, is a sun and shield; Yahweh gives favor and honor. No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Yahweh, commander of the hosts of heaven and the armies of Israel, how blessed is the man who trusts in You!"

And if this was the writer's meaning, the psalm's messianic significance is clear. With all confidence in God's word through His prophets, the psalmist looked with longing to the day of repentance, renewal and ingathering; the day when Yahweh, through the triumph of David's Branch, would at last become King of Israel in truth, and so also King over all the earth. Perhaps he saw David exiled, or David's kingdom in tatters; either way, He knew Yahweh would one day establish forever David's house and kingdom. One day, all mankind would make a pilgrimage to Yahweh on Mount Zion (Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:1-12).