

Psalm 84. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 21 August 2011.

The set reading for this morning is Psalm 84 ...

To the chief musician on the gittith. A Psalm of/for the sons of Korah.

How lovely are your dwelling places, O Lord of hosts!

My soul longs, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh shout for joy to the living God.

Even the sparrow has found a house, 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.

Blessed are those who dwell in your house, they will be still praising you! Selah.

Blessed is the man whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

Passing through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with blessings.

They go from strength to strength, before appearing before God in Zion.

O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah.

Behold, O God our shield, and look upon the face of your anointed!

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.

For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord will give grace and glory. No good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly.

O Lord of hosts, blessed is the man who trusts in you!

As you probably noticed, the inspired title of the psalm associates the psalm in some way with the 'sons (probably, 'the descendants') of Korah – either as written by one of them, written for them, or in some other way belonging to them.¹

This is one of eleven psalms which carry this particular title ... these psalms forming two separate groups – Psalms 42 to 49 (where Psalm 43 doesn't actually boast the title because it (Psalm 43) simply continues the mournful theme of Psalm 42) – and Psalms 84 to 88 (but excluding David's Psalm 86).²

Interestingly, our psalm (which opens the second group) is linked very closely with Psalms 42 and 43, which open the first group, there being many common themes and expressions ... and it may be worth noting that the divine title 'the living God' occurs in only these two places in the whole book of Psalms.³ And yet there is one striking difference. Because, whereas Psalms 42 and 43 maintain a constant lamentation on behalf of those who are debarred by circumstances from attending God's house and courts, Psalm 84 expresses the joy and jubilation of those who are privileged to be, and to serve, there.

For my part, I view our Psalm very much as a Pilgrim Psalm. According to the law of God, the men of Israel were required to journey to Jerusalem, nestling among the high mountains of Judea, three times a year to celebrate the great annual Feasts of the Lord – namely, the Passover and Unleavened Bread, Weeks and Pentecost, and Tabernacles.⁴

I take it from his reference to 'the early rain', which fell in late October/early November, that our psalmist had in view particularly the Feast of Tabernacles, which fell during the time of the autumn harvest.

The psalm is broken up neatly for us into three sections or stanzas of four verses each – a division marked by the word 'Selah' – indicating a pause of some kind, possibly a musical interlude – at the close of the first two sections.

You may have noticed that each of the three sections, verses 1 to 4, verses 5 to 8, and verses 9 to 12, contain a beatitude – a pronouncement of blessedness – on genuine and godly worshippers.

Addressing God in each case, these declare :

'Blessed are those who dwell in your house' in verse 4;

'Blessed is the man whose strength is in you' in verse 5; and

'Blessed is the man who trusts in you' in verse 12.

The psalmist speaks, that is, of the three-fold blessedness of *dwelling* in His (the Lord's) presence; of *drawing* on His strength; and of *depending* on Himself.

The underlying theme of the first section is that of the fervent desire of the psalmist's soul for God and His dwelling place.

The Lord's dwelling, His house and courts, is the place which, according to verse 1, the psalmist dearly loves, and for which, according to verse 2, he both longs and faints.

But, ultimately, what causes him to cry out for joy is not so much the grandeur of the Temple building, or its elaborate ritual ... not so much the company of other like-minded worshippers, or the songs they sing with great passion and enthusiasm ... what causes him to cry out for joy is the presence of the Lord Himself – of 'the living God'.

And with a handful of words he paints a most beautiful picture of others who dwell where God does – first, in verse 3, of small birds, and, second, in verse 4, of the Levites of Jerusalem.

First then, he speaks of the small birds – quite possibly, as our translation suggests, of common sparrows and restless swallows – of birds which not so much fly over the Temple precincts, spoken of here as the place of God's altars (with reference perhaps both to the brazen altar of burnt offering in the court and to the golden incense altar in the Holy Place) – which not so much fly above the Temple precincts, as actually build their nests and lay their young there. The point being that they make their home there. They truly 'dwell' there.

Nor they alone. So too do certain highly favoured men, verse 4, the Levites – of whom the 'sons of Korah' represented one family.⁵

Such men have the privilege and joy of 'still' praising God ... of 'ever', that is ... of 'constantly' and 'continually' ... praising God – an occupation in which, in their own distinctive way, the feathered residents of the Temple precincts also joined!

In the second section or stanza, the camera sweeps as it were away from the Temple courts to the crowds of pilgrims pursuing their journey towards Jerusalem for the purpose of joining in the worship at the forthcoming Feast.

The travelling pilgrim draws the strength for his long journey, the psalmist notes, from the Lord. And the pilgrim's heart and mind – the whole of his being, that is – remains focused steadily on the 'highways to Zion'.⁶

And the prospect before such pilgrims – of reaching their eagerly anticipated destination – the place which God Himself calls 'my city'⁷, and the Temple, God's glorious abode in that city ... this prospect makes all the exertions and difficulties of the way seem ever so light.

As verse 6 expresses it, 'passing through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs' – to them a valley showered with the blessing of the autumn rains.

I am in no position to be dogmatic about the significance of that expression 'the valley of Baca'. But it may well have referred to a literal valley – to some barren and arid valley through which the procession of pilgrims were compelled to pass on their way to the royal city.⁸

And I note that the word rendered 'Baca' is translated 'balsam trees' ('mulberry trees' in the 400-year old King James Version) on more than one occasion in the Old Testament ... and that the balsam tree not only thrives in dry and waterless areas, but that the gum which exudes from its bark seems to weep from there; on account of which the balsam tree was known to some people in Old Testament days as 'the weeping tree'. Indeed, although the actual word 'Baca' is never actually used in the Hebrew Old Testament as a word for 'weeping', it is derived from a root word meaning 'to weep'.

Putting all this together, I think it likely that the psalmist has in mind a valley known to him, if not to others, as 'the Valley of Weeping',⁹ through which the pilgrims had to pass. And I note that the Latin Vulgate translates the expression – memorably – as 'the vale of tears'.

And, certainly, not a few of God's people of all ages – our own included – have known what it is to pass through many a 'vale of tears' en route to their heavenly and eternal abode in God's presence.

But the testimony of our psalmist is that the pilgrim who draws his (or her) strength from the Lord of hosts turns that very valley into 'a place of springs', which enjoys that which I might call, in the language of Ezekiel 34, 'showers of blessings' – an expression which now doubt rings bells with some of us more senior folk here today!¹⁰

But it is the happy hope of reaching their goal (in their case, what the apostle Paul calls 'the Jerusalem which now is') and God's house there ... it is that happy hope which transforms the dreary and desolate valley into a place of refreshment for the soul. And the same is true – or should be – on a far grander scale for the believer today. That as we 'seek the city which (for us) is to come'¹¹ – 'the holy city, New Jerusalem'¹² – and anticipate seeing our Lord face

to face – the very prospect should transform our darkest and most troubled days ... as we too, passing through the valley of weeping, convert it into a place of spiritual refreshment.

For we know that there will be no tears in our eternal home. God Himself has promised as much ... several times!¹³ I was moved to read this past week words written by Joni Earekson Tada in her latest book,¹⁴ ... 'at the point when I do have the use of my arms to wipe away *my own* tears, I won't have to, because *God will*'. He will indeed, Joni.¹⁵

And, thinking of the variety of ways in which we can react to the trials and difficulties which God allows us to face in our 'valley of Baca', I have long enjoyed the verse ...

A yacht can go east, or a yacht can go west
By the selfsame wind that blows.
'Tis the set of the sails, and not the gales,
Which determines the way it goes.¹⁶

And so, to verse 7.

The prospect of appearing before God in company with many others of like-mind invigorates those whose 'strength is in' Him ... putting a spring in their steps ... for, whereas under ordinary circumstances, the strength of the footsore traveller diminishes in proportion to the distance he has covered, 'they go from strength to strength' – 'from glory to glory',¹⁷ I almost said!

The psalmist brings his second stanza to a close by appealing to the same '*Lord of hosts*' (to the Commander-in-Chief of all armies, both in heaven and on earth) and '*God of Jacob*' to whom Colin pointed us last week from Psalm 46.¹⁸

And, in so doing, the psalmist paves the way for the opening verse of his third stanza – which verse takes the form of a prayer for God's 'anointed' – in the context, a title for whichever king of David's line filled the throne of Judah at the time, and upon whose well-being, humanly speaking, the prosperity of the people depended.

In verse 10, the psalmist returns to his appreciation of the privilege and blessedness of approaching God.

'A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere',¹⁹ he gladly acknowledges, adding 'I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness'.

And I suspect that this latter sentence is loaded, coming as it does in a psalm linked very closely to 'the sons of Korah'. For we remember that it was Korah, the first cousin of Moses and Aaron, who perished in the wilderness following his rebellion against both them, and (as Moses pointed out at the time), against God who had bestowed on him and Aaron their respective offices.

I say 'perished', and so Korah did, when he was swallowed up alive into the ground along with Dathan and Abiram and his own servants.²⁰ And yet, unlike the families of Dathan and Abiram, who were consumed along with them²¹, in the sovereign mercy of God, the sons of Korah – and we are explicitly told this – did *not* die.²²

But not only were the sons of Korah spared God's judgement. Some of them were chosen by God to lead both the choral and the orchestral music in both the tabernacle and the Temple.²³ And not only so, but the sons of Korah were appointed as 'doorkeepers of the tabernacle ... in charge of the gates of the Lord'²⁴

Perhaps the most famous of Korah's descendants was the prophet Samuel. Yes, Samuel ... God's 'emergency man' as he has been styled ... the man used by God to establish a monarchy in Israel following the dark and chaotic days of the Judges. It comes as no surprise therefore to read that, following God's revelation to young Samuel of the fate of Eli and his house, and I quote, 'Samuel lay until morning; then *he opened the doors of the house of the Lord*'.²⁵

And with my eye firmly on verse 10, I note that, back in the days of Korah's rebellion, before ever God's judgement fell on Korah, Dathan and Abiram, on God's instruction Moses had exhorted the congregation of Israel, 'Depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men!'²⁶

You did notice that, didn't you? ... 'from *the tents* of these *wicked* men' ... from '*the tents of wickedness*'.

And here we have the author of this psalm – a psalm linked by title with 'the sons of Korah' – asserting in the strongest of language that he would 'rather be *a doorkeeper* in the house' of his God – which is what, by the grace of God, the sons of Korah had become, 'doorkeepers in the house of God' – than to 'dwell in *the tents of wickedness*' – which is where Korah and those who perished with him had once dwelt.

The expression 'I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God' can equally well be rendered 'I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God' – thereby stressing the psalmist's willingness to undertake the most humble, mundane and unassuming of tasks in the Lord's service, rather than to sit comfortably inside tents associated with the so-called 'pleasures of sin'.²⁷

I said earlier that, ultimately, what causes the psalmist to cry out for joy is not so much the building or the ritual, not so much the company of other like-minded worshippers or the songs they sing, but the presence of 'the living God' Himself.

And here in verse 11 we discover part of the reason why. Why *does* our writer esteem one day in God's courts better than a thousand spent (as the Message loosely paraphrases his sentiments) 'on Greek island beaches' – or, indeed, anywhere else? Why would he rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God than dwell in the tents of wickedness?

Let him tell us. In brief, it is because of *what God is*, and *what God does*. In the psalmist's own words ... 'the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord will give grace and glory. No good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly'.

If we are in darkness, the psalmist is saying, He will be to us a sun, to enlighten and to enliven us. If we are in danger, He will be to us a shield, to protect and defend us.

When the Lord had said to Abraham long before, 'Fear not, Abram, I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward', the patriarch had immediately responded, 'What will you give me ...?'.²⁸

Our psalmist doesn't need to ask. He knows. He knows that the Lord God gives, and gives unstintingly, grace, glory and good.

He bestows grace – favour, without cause or cost. He bestows glory – dignity and honour.

In one sense, with my eye on the content of our psalm, *grace* is how our spiritual pilgrimage *began*, and *glory* is how it will *end*.

And good? Alas, we often mistake that which is really good for us.²⁹ But God can be trusted to give to 'those who walk uprightly' all those things which He – in His infinite wisdom – knows to be (absolutely and only) good for them.

'God can be trusted', did I say?

Did you notice that that is exactly how our psalm closes? ... declaring the blessedness of the one who trusts in the Lord of hosts.

Truly ...

'Blessed are those who dwell in your house';
'Blessed is the man whose strength is in you'; and
'Blessed is the man who trusts in you'.

May we prove the three-fold blessedness of *dwelling* in His presence; of *drawing* on His strength; and of *depending* on Himself.

Footnotes

¹ 'The Psalms of the Sons of Korah', by M. D Goulder, page 2.

² The first set refer mainly to 'God' and the second to 'Lord'.

³ Elsewhere it occurs only in Josh. 3. 10 and Hos 1. 10.

⁴ Exod. 23. 14-17; Deut. 16. 16.

⁵ From the Kohath branch of the Levites, being one of three branches.

⁶ That we ought supply those last two words 'to Zion' to complete the words of the Hebrew sentence is clear to me from what is said of the terminus of the pilgrims' journey in verse 7 – where they are spoken of as 'appearing before God in Zion'.

⁷ Isa. 45. 13.

⁸ Although I have to say that I have failed to find any trustworthy source for any valley of that name.

⁹ Or, possibly, 'the Valley of the Balsam Trees'.

¹⁰ Courtesy of Major Daniel W. Whittle's hymn, 'There shall be showers of blessing'.

¹¹ Heb. 13. 14.

¹² Rev. 21. 2.

¹³ Isa. 25. 8; Rev. 7. 17; 21. 4.

¹⁴ 'Hope ... the best of things'.

¹⁵ And still thinking of transforming the Valley of Baca, or Valley of Weeping' into a place of spiritually refreshing springs, let me give you another quote ... this time from Laura Story. In case you don't know, Laura Story co-authored the song 'Indescribable', which has received worldwide recognition. Her latest album is entitled 'Blessings', and in the title song, she repeats the line, 'What if trials of this life are your mercies in disguise?' 'What if', indeed.

¹⁶ Based on lines written by Ella Wheeler Wilcox – a rather dubious source!

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 3. 18.

¹⁸ Psalm 46. 7, 11. This association is limited to these two psalms. Interestingly, Psalm 46 is also a Psalm of/for the sons of Korah.

¹⁹ This may possibly be rendered 'I prefer a Feast-day blessing to a thousand shekels'; so 'The Psalms of the Sons of Korah', by M. D Goulder, pages 47-48. Compare Psa. 119. 72.

²⁰ Num. 16. 32; 26. 10

²¹ Num. 16. 32.

²² Num. 26. 11.

²³ 1 Chron. 6. 31-38; 15. 16-26; 25. 1, 4-6; 2 Chron. 5. 12; 20. 14-19.

²⁴ 1 Chron. 9. 19; 26. 1; Neh. 11. 19.

²⁵ 1 Sam. 3. 15.

²⁶ Num. 16. 26.

²⁷ Heb. 11. 25.

²⁸ Gen. 15. 1-2.

²⁹ There are many things which the world around counts good, but which in reality are bad. Then, some things are good for one person, but bad for another. Again, some things are good for us at one time, but bad for us on another occasion.