

Psalm 84

Travel Plans

1. The Best Place on Earth

You won't consider the Taj Mahal to be beautiful if you do not have a concept of beauty inside your heart and mind that the sight of the Taj Mahal satisfies. You won't consider the Himalayas in Nepal or Tibet beautiful if you do not have a concept of beauty inside your heart and mind that the sight of the Himalayas satisfies. Emerson was indeed right when he said, "Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not."

What concept of beauty do you carry around in your heart? What do you want to see above all else? I don't know whether you get a kick out of seeing stately old church buildings or magnificent Buddhist temples or majestic Islamic mosques. I've seen the Eiffel Tower. I've seen the Badshai Mosque in Lahore. At that time I was interested in these impressive structures. I enjoyed exploring them. But I can't say that I have a longing to go back and see them again. You've heard of the Seven Wonders of the (ancient) World: the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Statue of Zeus at Olympia in Greece, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus in Asia Minor, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the Colossus of Rhodes, and the Lighthouse of Alexandria. These were spectacular structures. You can imagine someone seeing these structures and wanting to go back to see it again. But the sanctuary or temple in Jerusalem was not rated as one of the seven wonders of the world. What kind of a nut is this psalmist, we might ask? "*How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord God Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord*" (vv1-2). And again: "*Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be one about to enter the door to the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked*" (v10). Here is a bloke who really thinks the temple is not merely worth visiting, but who longs to go back there time and time again. This guy is actually desperate to get to this temple.

A lady rang a travel agent and said she wanted to go from Chicago to Hippopotamus, New York. At first the travel agent was completely bewildered because there is no such place as Hippopotamus in the state of New York. He asked, "You don't mean Buffalo, New York, do you?" "Yes, that's it! I knew it was some big animal", replied the woman. Another woman called an American travel agent and said, "I need to fly to Pepsi-cola on one of those computer planes." The travel agent asked, "Do you mean you want to fly to Pensacola on a commuter plane." She said, "Yeah, whatever." Some people don't know where they are going or how they're going to get there.

Now you can't say that about the psalmist and people like him. In verse 9 he says, "*Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose hearts are the highways.*" The NIV translates the second bit of this verse - "*who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.*" That is certainly the idea but it misses a great image. The Hebrew literally says, "*in whose hearts are the highways*", that is, the highways to Zion, to Jerusalem, where the temple is located.

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A couple of years back one of our cats got lost miles from our home. But the cat found its own way back to our house. The way to our house was somehow engraved in the heart of this cat. The psalmist is describing people like himself who are programmed like our cat. Locate the psalmist and people like him hundreds of miles away from the temple and they will find their way back to the temple because the roads, the route is written in their hearts. There is something that irresistibly pulls them towards the temple.

Of course, a lot of people fool themselves about what they will find at the end of their travels. A famous Dutch proverb quips, "Travel east or travel west, a man's own house is still the best." If this is true you might as well stay at home. But this is certainly not the psalmist's perspective. Bert Whitney thinks that Murphy's Law applies to travel and says,

If I traveled to the end of the rainbow
As Dame Fortune did intend,
Murphy would be there to tell me
The pot's at the other end.

Any benefit to be found in traveling is to be found in the traveling itself, not in arriving at the destination - at least that's what many people think. Albert Einstein said, "I love to travel, but hate to arrive." For Einstein it's the experience of traveling that satisfies. But that all depends on your reasons for traveling and what the final destination really means. My daughter, Rachel, used to spend days in Griffith with a family with whom she is very close. Rachel was not all that excited about the trip down. To her what mattered was being with these people she loves.

2. Not What You Know but Who You Know

And that brings us to the heart of this psalm. A number of us have traveled quite extensively. What is that makes a place special to us? Is it the wonderful sights we see? Is it the quality of the accommodation we enjoy? So often isn't it the friends we make? Often it is people who make the place. I would love to go back to Christchurch in New Zealand. Why? Well, I do like Christchurch. I think it's a beautiful city, small as it is. I love the river Avon that flows through the city. I love the Port Hills that surround the city. But it's not such things that make Christchurch special to me. It is the friends I know who still live there. If they weren't there I wouldn't have any hankering to go back to Christchurch. People make the place.

Why is the temple in Jerusalem so special, so precious to the psalmist and people like him? It is not people who make the place but a person - one very, very special person. Who is that person? Look at verse 2 again: "*My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.*" The psalmist longs to be in the temple because he knows that it is there that he will meet the living God. God is to be found in the temple. It is a person who makes the place. The temple is special because God himself is so precious, so greatly to be desired.

Can you identify with the hunger and thirst in the heart of this psalmist? Do you long to meet with God, to enjoy his presence, to have an intimate relationship with him?

For you and me things have changed. In Old Testament times God's people had to travel to the temple if they wanted to enter the presence of God and meet with him.

We no longer have to travel to enter the presence of God. The New Testament teaches us that we ourselves are the temple of God and that God, through the Holy Spirit, lives in each one of us. I wouldn't mind sometime taking a trip to Palestine and seeing for myself some of the places where famous events in biblical history took place. But some Christians have a strange and unbiblical idea that going to Palestine, which they wrongly think of as "the Holy Land", will somehow make them more spiritual. One church member told Phillip Brooks, that he was going to the Holy Land. He said that it was his intention to visit Mount Sinai. "In fact," the man told the minister, "I plan to climb to the top of that mountain and when I get there read aloud the Ten Commandments."

Thinking this would please Dr. Brooks, the church member was surprised to hear his pastor say, "You know, I can think of something even better than that." The man responded, "You can, Pastor? And what might that be?"

Brooks replied rather bluntly, "Just this. Instead of traveling thousands of miles to read the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, why not stay right here at home and keep them?"

However, while we don't have to travel like the psalmist, there is a great deal we can learn from him. There should be no complacency or apathy in our attitude towards God. We, like the psalmist, need to have a great hunger to enter the presence of God, to spend time with him. Also, though we don't have to travel from point A to point B to enter the presence of God, nevertheless there is a sense in which we are all pilgrims who are traveling towards heaven, the place where God ultimately dwells. When we get to heaven then we will experience the presence of God in a way we never imagined. The highway to Jerusalem in the state of Israel is not written in your heart or mine. But I trust that the highway to heaven is engraved in your heart, that there is something deep in your soul that pulls you irresistibly towards heaven and spending eternity there in the presence of God.

3. A New Home

The famous writer Mark Twain once joked, "In Paris they simply stared when I spoke to them in French; I never did succeed in making those idiots understand their own language." Going to foreign places can be fun and interesting. But it is hard to feel at home in a foreign place. People there just don't speak the same language. But when our psalmist visits God in his temple in Jerusalem he does not feel that he is visiting a foreign place. This is not a place to enjoy for a short time and then return home. The heart of the psalmist is indeed characterized by home-sickness. But for him "home" means living in the presence of God.

The psalmist lived in Old Testament times when one could only visit the temple and revisit it. He longed for what was then impossible, to live in the presence of God. Look at verses 3-4: "*Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young - a place near your altar, O Lord Almighty, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.*" Is that what you long for above all else? To spend the rest of your life in the presence of God?

4. A Secure, Sunny Spot

Who is this God who is so greatly to be loved? Look at verse 11: "*For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favour and honour; no good thing does he withhold*

from those whose walk is blameless." You have probably noticed that this psalm is all about the blessing of God. We see this in verse 4: *"Blessed are those who dwell in your house."* We see this in verse 5: *"Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose hearts are the highways to Zion."* We see it in the very last verse: *"O Lord Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you."* Now in the psalms God's blessing is his protective favour. This is summarized in the portrayal of God as "sun and shield." The Lord bestows favour and honour we are told. That is, he shines on our lives like the sun, a sun that enables crops to grow and the land to flourish.

Of course, here in New South Wales some people sometimes get a bit sick of the shining sun. Such people feel the sun shines too much. We like warm, sunny days. We like going to the beach on such days. But we are very much aware that too much sunshine causes lots of problems. Our land is ravaged by drought and bushfires. So, maybe it isn't such a good thing for us to think of God as our "sun"? Well, that is certainly not the way the psalmist sees God. Consider how God's blessing is described in verse 6: *"As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools."*

Nobody knows where the Valley of Baca was located or what it was like. It may have been a place associated with grief and sorrow because the word Baca may mean "tears" or "weeping." Certainly, many farming areas of New South Wales have become places of weeping. Obviously, the Valley of Baca was a dry place, like a desert. But the psalmist says that when those God has blessed pass through such a dry, barren place the blessing of God is experienced by such a place. It is transformed into being a place of springs. Wonderful refreshing rains fall upon it. So, yes, God is indeed our sun, but he is not a relentless, unforgiving, harsh sun. He is our Sun as one who is committed to blessing his people and using them to bring blessing to others. Maybe the prolonged drought in New South Wales can be taken as a symbol of the lack of influence God's people have in modern Australia. What a wonderful thing it would be if 10% of all people in Sydney were in Bible-based churches! What a wonderful thing it would be for our land and our state if 10% of the population prayed for rain! However, the psalmist is, of course, speaking metaphorically. It still remains true that if love for God fills our hearts and we live our lives as those who experience his rich blessing then that blessing will also benefit those with whom we come into contact.

God's "blessing" is his protective favour. He is not merely our Sun but also our Shield. Verse 11 is not the only place in this psalm where we find the word "shield." In verses 8-9 the psalmist presents a major prayer request: *"Hear my prayer, O Lord God Almighty; listen to me, O God of Jacob. Look upon our shield, O God; look with favour on your anointed one."* The person whom the psalmist regards as the shield of God's people is also the one he calls God's anointed one or Messiah. That is, he is the king. What is the point of this prayer request? It is when God blesses the king that the people experience the protective favour, the blessing of God. The king protects the people from their enemies. But he can only do this if he himself is favoured and protected by God who is the ultimate Sun and Shield. Our main prayer today is much like this one. God's blessing in us and through us is dependent on how highly Jesus Christ is exalted. We pray that God will exalt and lift up the name of Jesus; that we and others will appreciate just how great Jesus is.