

20251116 The Pilgrimage of the Soul – Ps Bijoy

Psalm 84

The book of Psalms has often been called the soul's medicine chest. That description fits beautifully because the Psalms speak to the deepest longings and pains of the human heart. When our souls ache, when life feels dry and distant, we find in the Psalms the words we cannot form ourselves. They sing our sorrow and teach our hope.

Psalm 84 is one of those songs. It describes not merely a poem of worship but a journey of faith. It captures the heart of a pilgrim longing for the presence of God. The Christian life has often been described as a pilgrimage.

For the writer of Psalm 84, that image was not a metaphor alone. It was a lived experience. Each year, the faithful of Israel journeyed to Jerusalem for the great feasts, especially the Feast of Tabernacles. From distant villages they travelled through hills and valleys to reach the temple of God. This psalm gives voice to one pilgrim's heartbeat along the way.

"How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God."

These opening lines invite us into holy longing. These words reveal not just a journey across miles, but a journey of the soul. The psalm unfolds in three clear movements. Verses 1-4 describe a Pilgrimage of Longing. Verses 5-8 portrays a Pilgrimage of Discovery. Verses 9-12 conclude with a Pilgrimage of Fulfilment.

Pilgrimage of Longing (Verses 1- 4)

The psalm opens with an ache: "How lovely is your dwelling place." The word lovely here carries more than beauty. It means beloved or deeply cherished. The pilgrim is not admiring architecture; he is yearning for communion. "My soul yearns, even faints." The Hebrew word *kalah* means to be consumed or spent with desire. His whole being, heart and flesh cries out for the living God.

I remember when I used to feel homesick when I was at boarding school and I used to eagerly wait for the summer holidays; you know depth of this feeling. The psalmist is yearning for the presence of God. His longing is so intense that even the sparrows nesting near the altar make him envious. "Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself." He sees the smallest creatures resting close to God's altar, safe and secure, and he longs to dwell where they do.

He ends this first stanza with the first of three blessings: "Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you." This is not about luxury but intimacy. The pilgrim's happiness lies in being close to God, joining the endless chorus of praise.

This is the first truth of the psalm: real worship begins with desire. The Temple's beauty mattered only because the presence of God filled it. The temple itself, magnificent though it was, is not the object of his love. The Lord is. The place matters only because of the Person who dwells there.

This psalm therefore presses a searching question: What do we desire most? Do we yearn for God's presence or merely for his blessings? When spiritual hunger fades, something is wrong in the soul. Just as loss of physical appetite signals sickness in the body, loss of desire for God shows spiritual dryness.

For the longing that begins in this life will be fully satisfied only when we see God face to face. Until then, worship becomes a foretaste of that joy. When we gather as God's people, we come to the true temple, the living Church, built not of stones but of hearts. Christ himself is our dwelling place.

Recently I spoke to one of our church member. She had just returned home from the hospital. During our short conversation she said again and again, "I'll be in church this Sunday. I'll see you there." Her voice was weak, but her heart still longed for the presence of the Lord. Her soul desired for the living God. That is holy desire.

How is your desire today? Does your heart cry for him? If not, remember that the altar the sparrows nested near was the altar of sacrifice. Love is rekindled when we remember the cost of our forgiveness. The psalmist looked toward that altar in faith; we look back to the cross, where the true sacrifice was offered. God's own Son became the offering so that we might dwell in his house forever.

2. A Pilgrimage of Discovery (Verses 5-8)

The next verses shift from longing to endurance. "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage." Twice the word strength appears, in verses 5 and 7, surrounding a difficult image-the Valley of Baka.

The name Baka comes from a Hebrew root meaning weeping. It may refer to a valley near Jerusalem where balsam trees grew in dry soil. The image is vivid - a barren valley that every pilgrim must cross to reach Zion.

Every believer knows that valley. It is the season of dryness, the time when faith feels thin and tears come easily. Yet the psalmist says something astonishing: "As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs." The place of tears becomes a place of refreshment. Even the autumn rains fill it with pools. The Hebrew word for "pools" sounds like the word for "blessings." The desert becomes a sanctuary. How? Because their hearts are set on pilgrimage. The direction of the heart determines the experience of the valley. Those whose hearts are fixed on God find new life even in sorrow. God's strength meets them precisely where their own fails.

Think back on your own life. Have you not found that the times of deepest loss often became the places of greatest growth? When the valley was dark, when you had no map, when every prayer seemed unanswered, somehow you found springs of grace you never knew existed.

Paul learned this truth when he pleaded for God to remove his thorn. The answer came not through deliverance but through dependence: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” So Paul could say, “When I am weak, then I am strong.”

That is the paradox of the Valley of Baka. God does not always change the path, but he changes the pilgrim. The one who begins the journey tired and weary ends it stronger. “They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.” The phrase means that every stage of the journey adds new power. Grace accumulates.

When we depend on our own strength, the valley drains us. When we depend on God’s strength, the valley deepens us. That is why the psalmist cries, “Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty; listen to me, God of Jacob.” It is the cry of faith, the prayer of the pilgrim who knows that God hears the broken hearted.

A marathon runner keeps his eyes fixed on the finish line. He may drink water along the route, but he never stops to rest because his heart is set on finishing. The Christian pilgrim lives the same way. Our hearts are set toward God. We press on through hardship, not because the road is easy but because the destination is worth it.

3. A Pilgrimage of Fulfilment (Verses 9-12)

The final stanza of verses brings us to the gates of Zion. The traveller’s longing is fulfilled. “Look on our shield, O God; look with favour on your anointed one.” At first, this line seems to interrupt the flow, but it is a crucial link. The word shield refers to Israel’s king. The anointed one in Hebrew is Mashiach - Messiah. The psalmist prays for God’s favour upon the king because the peace of the pilgrims depends upon the strength of the throne.

In Christ this prayer finds its fullest meaning. God has indeed looked with favour upon his Anointed One. The risen Christ reigns secure, and through him our way to the Father is open. Our access to God’s presence is guaranteed because our King is enthroned forever.

Now the pilgrim can say with full contentment, “Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.” One day with God surpasses a thousand days of worldly pleasure. One moment in his presence outweighs a lifetime of empty delights. The psalmist adds, “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.”

Back then the doorkeeper was the humblest servant in the temple, standing at the threshold, welcoming others in. The psalmist says he would gladly trade every luxury of the world for the lowest place in God's house. The reason follows in verse 11: "For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favour and honour."

The Lord is a sun. He gives light, guidance, and life. Without the sun, the world is cold and dead. Without God, the soul is the same. The Lord is also a shield. He protects his people from harm. And he gives favour and honour - grace and glory. Grace is God's loving acceptance now. Glory is the radiant completion of that grace in eternity.

Then comes the beautiful promise - "No good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless." Notice it does not say that God withholds nothing, but that he withholds no good thing. Sometimes what we think is good would harm us, so God in love denies it. What he withholds is never truly good for us. What he gives is always best.

Who are the blameless? Not the perfect, but those who trust. The psalm ends where faith begins: "Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you." To trust God is to walk blamelessly, not because we are flawless but because we rest in his faithfulness.

When the psalmist reaches this point, his journey is complete. Desire has led him to strength, and strength has led him to satisfaction. The restless heart has found its home. Augustine once said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Psalm 84 sings that truth long before Augustine wrote it.

Conclusion

Because of Jesus, our own pilgrimage is secure. He is the anointed King in whom the Father delights. Through him we enter the courts of the Lord. Through him our journey, with all its tears, becomes a road of blessing. Through him we move from strength to strength until we appear before God in Zion.

Perhaps today you find yourself in the Valley of Baka. Life feels dry. Prayer feels empty. Hope seems distant. Remember, the God who met the pilgrim there will meet you too. The valley that once smelled of dust will one day flow with springs of grace. You may not see it yet, but every tear you shed is watering the soil where new life will grow.

And when you finally reach the end of the road, you will discover what the psalmist knew by faith, that one day in the courts of the Lord is better than a thousand elsewhere. The joy that awaits will make every hardship worthwhile.

So keep walking. Keep singing through the valley. Keep longing for his presence. For the Lord God is your sun and your shield. He will not withhold any good thing from you. And when your pilgrimage is done, you will see him in Zion and rejoice forever.

"Blessed is the one who trusts in you."