

Lesson 11 | August 11, 2024

The Blessing of God's Presence

Study Text: Psalm 84:1–12

Central Truth: The presence of God brings blessing to His children.

Key Verse: Psalm 84:4

Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising thee. *Selah* (KJV).

What joy for those who can live in your house, always singing your praises. *Interlude* (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will recognize the differences between Old Testament believers and New Testament believers when it comes to entering God's presence.
- Students will appreciate the joy of longing for the presence of God.
- Students will commit to seeking God's presence and respond to His presence through loving obedience to Him.

Introducing the Study

Say: God made humans to be social beings. We are emotionally, spiritually, and even physically healthier when other people—valued friends and family, and even acquaintances and strangers—are present in our lives.

Opening Activity—Choose Your Company

Ask. *If you could spend a day with anyone, past or present, whom would you choose? How would you spend that day? Why?*

Say: There are many ways to answer this question. Some may choose a famous person from the past that they admire or find interesting. Others may go with a beloved relative or friend that they miss. Such an experience would be quite exciting for some. For others, it might be a letdown, especially if it were a famous person who failed to live up to expectations. Many might find it to be a wonderful day with someone they especially cherish. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Spending time with others can surely be special for us. And as much as we might enjoy being with someone famous, the best times together happen with those closest to us. This is especially true for Christians, as we have the great pleasure and privilege of spending time with God. As we move through its twelve verses, we find that Psalm 84 is a great reminder of why this is true. Written by a member of the descendants of Korah, these are the words of someone who longs to be near to God. Through the course of some marvelous poetry, we discover why this is so. God has enriched our lives with

numerous blessings. He favors us, hears us, consoles us, and protects us. As we move through this psalm, think about specific ways that your life is blessed when you are in the presence of God.

Part 1—Longing for God’s House

How Lovely Is Your Dwelling Place

Psalm 84:1–2

Say: We often focus on the psalms as a source of beautiful lyrics for praise and worship songs. And this is indeed true. However, the Book of Psalms also instructs us, rebukes us, challenges us, and exhorts us. Psalm 84 is a good example of that final category, exhorting us to revisit our priorities and respond by cultivating a deeper longing for God’s presence. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Resource Packet Item 1: Types of Psalms

Distribute the information sheet and discuss it, emphasizing the variety of themes displayed in Psalms.

Psalm 84 is a good example of how music, especially in the Book of Psalms, can be used to instruct God’s people on doctrine, theology, and Scripture itself. This psalm takes the form of a song affirming the blessing of God’s presence.

When writing, “How lovely is your dwelling place” (verse 1, NLT), the Psalmist is referring to Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem (see verse 2). This was the dwelling place of God on earth in the Old Testament. As such, the temple was a profoundly special place to those followers of God. Israelites would go there to offer sacrifices of praise, thanksgiving, repentance, and cleansing. Yet we must catch the basic point of this psalm: The Psalmist is not so much exalting in the thought of entering a building as much as entering God’s presence. The title “Lord of Heaven’s Armies” affirms the Lord’s sovereignty and power in all the earth.

The desire for His presence, rather than a building, clarifies these first two verses. The temple is “lovely” (verse 1, NLT) because God is there. The Psalmist longs to go to the temple because he longs for God’s presence. He will “shout joyfully” and “with [his] whole being” (verse 2, NLT) because he is in God’s presence.

We see this idea of yearning or longing for God throughout the Psalms, perhaps most vividly in Psalm 42, which uses the image of a parched and starving person in search of provision. Yet this vivid terminology serves a higher purpose than just beautiful expression. It teaches believers—then and now—that feelings of desire, joy, and wonder are commonplace as we seek His presence.

Of note, verse 1 begins rather uniquely in Hebrew, with the expressive question, “What?” It serves as an exclamation of glory, as if to say, “What is this? It is the most lovely and beloved place that one could be.” (The New Living Translation captures this

by stating, “How lovely ...”) Then in the verses that follow, the Psalmist proceeds to describe the many reasons this is true.

Discuss

? How would you describe the experience of being in God’s presence?

? Why is it important to see things like going to church as a matter of seeking God’s presence rather than traveling to a building?

A Place of Joy

Psalm 84:3–4

Say: We’ve probably all heard that famous saying from the world of real estate: “The value of a house depends on three main factors: location, location, location.” Everyone has a favorite place to be when life is hard and we need rest. In Psalm 84:3–4, the Psalmist made a similar observation with regard to the temple. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The Psalmist pondered God’s great creation as he exclaimed in verse 3: “Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow builds her nest and raises her young at a place near your altar” (verse 3, NLT). This is a reference to the birds that built their nests in the area of the courtyard of the temple, near the altar. These birds had opportunity to be close to God’s presence through the course of daily living, as they cared for themselves and raised their young. The Psalmist saw them as privileged, in a sense, because they were always close to God.

The Psalmist’s words remind believers today of a wonderful reality that we enjoy: We don’t need to travel to a building to be in the presence of God. The apostle Paul wrote: “Don’t you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16, NLT; see also 1 Peter 2:4–5). Through Christ, Christians have the privilege—and the responsibility—of forming the dwelling place of God. In our fellowship and brotherhood together as the Church, and even in our own individual lives, we experience the close, personal presence of God.

In Psalm 84:4, the focus moves from birds to people. Specifically, the Psalmist points out the great privilege of those who live in the temple environs. This would include the priests and Levites who did the work of the temple. For them, the presence of God was not visited only on special occasions, but it was an ongoing reality of life. Words and acts of praise were their livelihood. To the Psalmist, such a life might be best described as incomparable joy—an interesting highlight, given that priests and Levites often dealt with matters of sin and impurity among the people. Yet their existence was marked with joy.

Discuss

? Why do you think the Psalmist focused on joy as the description of one who lived continuously in the presence of God near the temple?

? What should be the identifying marks of our lives as people who have the privilege of existing in God's presence on a daily basis?

Part 2—Blessed in God's House

Blessing Comes from the Lord

Psalm 84:5–6

Say: Psalm 84 takes a bit of a turn in verse 5, expressing the imagery of the world outside of the temple and the great contrast between that world and life in and around the temple. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Psalm 84:5–6 describes the joy and anticipation that would fill pilgrims from all around the nation of Israel as they made their journey to the fall festival that is the Feast of Tabernacles. This was the last of the three major Jewish feasts celebrated each year (along with Passover and the Feast of Pentecost). It was held for one week during the month of Tishri (roughly bridging September and October). The Feast of Tabernacles, also called the Feast of the Ingathering (see Exodus 23:16, KJV), celebrated the harvest of grain and fruit. In this sense, it was a general celebration of thanksgiving to God for His great provision and care for His people through the year. Their toil in the fields and vineyards, while difficult, had been greatly blessed by God.

It is no surprise, then, that the Psalmist described the travelers as “blessed” (Psalm 84:5, KJV). This word, so common to the Old Testament, describes someone who enjoys a heightened state of joy and happiness as a result of the kind acts of God bestowed upon their lives. Here in Psalm 84, the term blessed takes on an even fuller meaning. The pilgrims had been blessed by God's kindness and mercy through the year, and now they would find the great added blessing of entering into His presence at the temple.

Verse 6 mentions the Valley of Baca as part of their journey. The word Baca is derived from a word meaning “weeping.” A real valley in Israel, “the Valley of Weeping” (NLT) is a dry, arid, and difficult place that would be transformed by the autumn rains. The picture, then, is one of provision, symbolizing the marvelous blessings of God. Because of His mercy and kindness, His children had not been left in a dry, difficult place through the year. Instead, He had replenished the land with rain, and in doing so, refreshed their hearts with joy.

What a marvelous picture of God's blessing in the lives of believers today. We experience His provision and blessing day after day. Yet the time of praise and worship in His presence is not confined to a festival that follows a days-long journey to a particular site. We have opportunity to praise Him in His presence at any time.

Discuss

? What are some ways Christians can celebrate God's blessings?

? Describe in specific terms how God has blessed you in the past. How did you respond to these blessings? How did you show your gratitude?

A Place of Refreshing and Strength

Psalm 84:7–8

Say: Psalm 84:7 is an excellent example of how the Book of Psalms so eloquently articulates the realities of life in our fallen world. We face challenges, disappointments, dangers, and fears. Yet, for the believer, there is hope to be found in God—and refreshing to be found in His presence. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Psalm 84:7 recognizes that God’s people sometimes need more strength. This is symbolized in the journey from the furthest regions of Israel to the temple in Jerusalem. As they go, they are burdened with the provisions needed to get them there and home again. They encounter obstacles to climb or avoid. In addition, travel in the ancient Near East was dangerous—unpredictable weather, wild animals, and violent robbers all posed a potential threat. Yet verse 7 declares, “They will continue to grow stronger” (NLT). The very anticipation of arriving in Zion and worshipping in God’s presence would strengthen their hearts. As they felt weak, they could meditate on His greatness along the way. Each step brought them closer to that moment they would appear before God at the temple.

Verse 8 then proceeds to describe the moment when the pilgrims arrived in Jerusalem. We immediately notice the third reference to the “Lord God of Heaven’s Armies” (NLT; see also verses 1,3). This phrase appears frequently in the Old Testament and is more familiarly translated “Lord of Hosts.” The word translated “Hosts” is, in fact, the word for “armies.” Therefore, this title for God takes on special meaning here. God often does battle for us, just as He gives us strength for battle or delivers us from evil forces we battle. This is a common theme in the Book of Psalms (see 18:34,39; 21:9; 24:8; 55:18).

The pilgrims, then, have experienced the blessings of God’s strength and refreshing through the challenges of the journey to Jerusalem. As a result, they can say with confidence as they approach His presence: “O Lord . . . hear my prayer” (verse 8, NLT). Yet we must not lose sight of the parallelism in this verse. The very next phrase is: “Listen, O God of Jacob” (NLT). This repeats the previous line, but here the Psalmist invokes God’s covenant promises by mentioning Jacob the patriarch. The message of this verse is clear: God is mighty. God hears His people. And His people have the assurance that His blessings of strength and help will continue because He is faithful to His promises.

What can we learn from the example of these pilgrims? First, they clearly did not take the presence of God lightly. His presence was something to be greatly desired and deeply cherished. How much more might that be so for us, who have the privilege of dwelling continually in the presence of God? Second, they clung to the precious truths they knew about God. He is mighty on behalf of His people, and His blessings are tied to His irrevocable promises. Yet we have an added sense of hope as New Testament

Christians. We enjoy these blessings all the more, because God's presence is a constant and enduring reality.

Resource Packet Item 2: Count Your Blessings

Distribute the worksheet and encourage students to fill it out during the week. Next week, begin the class session with a time of testimony, inviting students to share the blessings they identified as well as talk about what they might have learned from spending a week recording their blessings.

Discuss

- ? How can we avoid taking the blessings of God lightly, and instead truly appreciate all that He has done and is doing for us?
- ? What are some of the privileges and joys of knowing that we dwell in God's presence continually? How might that reality also be sobering to us?

Part 3—Good Comes to the Righteous It Is Better to Dwell with the Lord

Psalm 84:9–10

Say: Psalm 84:9 continues the prayer of the pilgrims that began in verse 8. However, we do well to keep in mind the great words of exaltation that came before. The prayer is a kind of capstone to the psalm, and as such, it restates the important points that have already been spoken. Take note of the themes and emphases that are repeated in verses 9–12. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Psalm 84:9 begins with intercession for the king. The Psalmist asks God to “look with favor upon the king, our shield!” (NLT). The king was God's appointed leader of the people, the one responsible for protecting the nation through wise choices and the use of military might if needed. The prayer, then, asked for God's favor (protection, blessing, and success) to rest upon this human leader.

Then the prayer continued, “Show favor to the one you have anointed” (NLT). We see on many occasions in the Old Testament that God's chosen king for His people is anointed, which conveys God's intended favor and blessing upon the individual as the man who would lead the nation (see 1 Samuel 10:1; 16:13; 1 Kings 1:39). This anointing, done with oil, was very much a spiritual reality. The king would receive power, strength, and wisdom from the Lord as he sought the Lord's presence. This divine favor and provision would be crucial to leading the nation.

The psalm moved again into exaltation for the presence of the Lord. While the words of verse 10 are a familiar refrain, its full meaning must not be lost. In Scripture, the number 1,000 denotes fullness and completion. The message is that it is a greater privilege to be in God's presence even for a moment than to be anywhere else in this world for a lifetime. Similarly, it is better to take the posture and position of a humble servant

(“gatekeeper,” NLT) in God’s presence than to spend one’s temporal life enjoying momentary pleasures in the midst of the wicked.

Discuss

? How much priority should Christians place on praying for their spiritual leaders? Their secular leaders? What should we pray for each?

? What are some specific reasons why it is better to seek out and live in God’s presence than to enjoy the pleasures of sin while we’re in this world?

God Is Our Sun and Our Shield

Psalm 84:11–12

Say: Psalm 84:10 sets the stage for the triumphant words of the Psalmist in verses 11–12. All of the blessings mentioned in this passage come only to the righteous. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Psalm 84:11 begins, “God is our sun and our shield” (NLT). Once again, we see the promise of God’s protection, this time joined by a symbol of provision: the sun. Just as the sun provides the light and heat necessary for life, provision, and prosperity, God provides for His people. He promises that He “will withhold no good thing from those who do what is right” (NLT).

The psalm ends with yet another reference to the “Lord of Heaven’s Armies” (verse 12, NLT). This great God we serve—the One who is sovereign over all powers of the earth—promises blessing upon blessing to those who trust in Him.

Resource Packet Item 3: The Power of a Song

Distribute Discuss the worksheet, encouraging students to reflect on it during the week.

Discuss

? In what ways does God bring joy into our lives?

? What do you think it means to say that “God is our sun”?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Take time this week to examine the priority you place on giving undivided attention to God and spending time in His presence. To what extent do you live in His presence, even amid the thoughts and concerns of the day? Pray that God will help you begin to cherish His presence anew.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

■ Find time each day this week to seek God in intercession for others in a place where you are entirely undistracted from His presence.

■ Remind a fellow Christian facing a struggle that he or she can find hope and help in God’s presence. Then pray with that person.

- Pray for someone this week who has strayed from the presence of God.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Abraham Hosts the Lord.

Genesis 18:1–10

Tuesday:

Joshua Lingers in God's Presence.

Exodus 33:8–11

Wednesday:

David Delights in God's House.

Psalms 27:4–6

Thursday:

Jesus Teaches in the Synagogue.

Luke 4:16–21

Friday:

A Miracle at the Temple.

Acts 4:1–10

Saturday:

Spiritual Gifts for the Church.

1 Corinthians 12:27–31