

3. Is it possible for us to live in God's 'courts' today and not leave them? What does verse 10 mean to people today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The psalm seems on first reading to give glory to the Temple in Jerusalem, and we have to be careful to understand the complex way in which people thought about God's presence with them in Old Testament times. The Temple was a visible sign of God's presence more than a solitary 'abode' where He alone could be found, and there are times when we need to see our buildings as a visible sign of God's presence in a community, for example. However, there can be no substitute today for the active worship of God's people, in which He is to be uniquely experienced. Carol services are a great example of God's people opening up their worship to the community and making God's presence in the world real and exciting for all who will receive God's message of love.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Do you really enjoy worshipping God together with others? This is a serious question, because God does intend us to enjoy each other's company in worship. Pray and ask the Lord to help you enjoy your worship!*
- *Pray for those who do not have the physical freedom to worship the living God because of the prejudices of governments, regimes and oppressive faiths.*

Final Prayer

Through love, Lord Jesus, You have won for us the greatest of gifts, the redemption of our souls. From Your birth at Bethlehem to Your death on Calvary, Your life was given for us; how can we ever thank You? We offer You our love and give You all glory and honour Lord Jesus. Thank You for our salvation: AMEN

Psalm 84

No: 17 Week: 171 Tuesday 23/12/08

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father, bring us the precious gift of love
And may we take it and use it for forgiveness and healing
Dear Lord and Father, bring us the gracious gift of faith
And may we take it and use it to enable us to do what is right
Dear Lord and Father, bring us the glorious gift of hope
And may we take it and use it to bless and inspire each other
You both gave and received these gifts at Christmas; so may we. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Christmas

Pray for those who struggle over Christmas, wanting to enjoy the festival, but remaining hurt by friends or family. Pray that the season will be a time of healing for all who seek it.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who have lost money in recent financial scandals*
- *Give thanks for your home, and everything within in it*
- *Pray for all who work across the world for the health of nations*

Meditation

Come, my Saviour, Jesus Christ,
For after all my wandering and searching
I need the grace of love's redeeming liberty.

If I am lost, then find me;
If I am stubborn, then move me;
If I am resistant, then melt me.

If I am weary, then give me rest;
If I am troubled, then soothe me;
If I am sick, then heal me.

If I am ready, then take me;
If I am willing, then lead me;
If I am able, then empower me.

Come, my Saviour, Jesus Christ,
For if I live by faith and seek the heart of God
I will truly find my bonds released, and be set free.

Bible Study - Psalm 84

¹ For the director of music. According to Gittith. Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm.

My heart and my flesh cry out to the living God.

*How lovely is Your dwelling-place,
O LORD of hosts!*

² *My soul longs, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;*

³ *Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself
Where she may lay her young;
a place near your altar,*

O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.

⁴ Blessed are those who live in Your house;
ever singing Your praises. *Selah*

⁵ Blessed are those whose strength is in You,
Your pathways are set in their hearts.

⁶ Passing through the 'Weeping' Valley,
they make it a place of springs;
and the autumn rains cover it with blessing.

⁷ They go from strength to strength,
and the God of God's appears in Zion!

⁸ O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;

listen to me, O God of Jacob. Selah

⁹ Look on our defence, O God;
Be pleased to look on Your anointed.

¹⁰ Better is one day in Your courts
than a thousand I might choose;
Or to stand at the threshold of Your Temple
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield,
He bestows favour and honour;
No good thing does the LORD hold back
from those whose walk in truth.

¹² O LORD Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in You.

Review

Psalm 84 is a wonderful psalm of praise to God which is thought to come from the time of pilgrimages to Jerusalem in the ninth to seventh centuries BC. Such pilgrimages were held annually for the 'Day of Atonement' when priests at the Temple who offer the sacrifices for the sins of the people and celebrate the blessings of their God. On this occasion, it was also customary to pray for the king, whose work was to be a leader of the people and formally represent them. The people believed that their own lives and future were wrapped up with that of their king (the 'anointed' of verse 9) and although they would not dream of ranking him as a god, as other nations did, the people were remarkably willing concede to the will and guidance of their king.

What makes this psalm relevant for us now at Christmas time? Firstly, Christmas is our 'annual festival', when we praise God for the great blessing of sending His son Jesus as a child to save us from our sins, and become the complete version of God's 'atonement'. Secondly, there is a great deal in this psalm about gathering together, journey and pilgrimage, which reminds us of the many journeys in the story of Jesus' birth; Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, and then the shepherds and the Kings to Bethlehem to worship the baby Jesus. Thirdly, there is a sense of joy and excitement in this psalm, which, of all Old Testament texts, seems to capture the sense of excitement we have in anticipation of the great festival day itself: for us it is Christmas, and for the Israelites, it was the Day of Atonement.

The expectation of great worship There is a palpable sense of expectation in the first stanza of the psalm (84:1,2), and everyone who reads this is captivated by it. The first words are an expression of pure awe; something we might expect from someone making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the first time, having heard so much about it, or something we might expect from a child expectant of the delights of Christmas day. 'My soul long, even faints' says the psalm, and behind these words, the one who says them is not captivated merely by the sight of Jerusalem or the expectation of a great event, but the awesome worship of Almighty God in which they have been caught up; 'my heart and my

flesh cry out to the living God' (84:2). We may well feel the same at a well presented and worshipful carol service!

Coming into God's presence How blessed it is to be close to the things of God! The psalmist envies the swallows nesting in the Temple and those who live near it and serve in its courts (84:3,4). Each of us has our own life and work and we treasure the presence of our God with us in the daily things of life, but it is part of our human nature that our souls are genuinely uplifted when we gather together specially for worship and praise in God's 'house'. The Temple of old was the focus of pilgrimage and worship, but today, God's presence in Jesus Christ is wherever His people gather to give their celebratory praise.

In verses 5,6 and 7, the theme of journeying dominates the poetry, and as we read, there is a thin dividing line between the literal and physical pathway taken by pilgrims, and the spiritual 'pathways ... set in their hearts' (84:5). Verse 6 appears to reflect the difficulty of journeying through a dry valley (Hebrew, the 'Bacah Valley'), but this is achieved by the Lord's spiritual blessings and the natural provision of rain. Those who endure in pilgrimage and hope are those who will live to see the revelation of God in Zion (84:7).

A prayer At the heart of this psalm is a prayer (84:8-10), followed by a blessing (84:11,12) which forms the climax of the pilgrim's worship. In ancient Israel, the worshipper came to the Temple and paused in reverence after addressing God and asking Him to hear the prayers offered (84:8 - see the pause, 'selah' at the end). Firstly, the pilgrim says a prayer asking the Lord to bless the people and their festival, using the words 'look on our defence'. These words sound strange to us, but they were a way of asking God to honour the defences (in other translations, the 'shield') of the city of Jerusalem, which gave people confidence that their place of worship was secure. Physical security to worship God may not be our concern today, though we should respect the fact that in some countries, it still is. Nevertheless, spiritual security is always our concern, and the unity and worship of God's people is always their greatest defence against the attacks of the enemy.

Being with God's people The prayer goes on to bless 'the anointed' who was the king of old (84:9), and for us at Christmas time, it is the baby Jesus born in Bethlehem to be our Saviour. Together with the most ancient of believers in God, we would rather spend time in His presence and with His people than spend it with those who have rejected Him. We live in a world that has perhaps rejected God outright on a larger and more widespread scale than ever before in history, and the world's apparent riches and pleasures always tempt God's people to turn away and join this rejection. However, whatever our circumstances and workplace, the truest spiritual blessings come when we put that world aside and worship our God with others; 'better is one day in your courts ... than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.'

At the end of the psalm, the pilgrim reflects on the experience of faith and worship, grateful for the 'favour and honour' of the Lord God (84:11). The last two verses express satisfaction that God has not disappointed; He has not held back His blessings, and trust in Him has been rewarded. In the same way, we look at each other after Christmas and say each year, 'Now that was the best Christmas ever!' and in so doing bless and thank God whose birth into the world has given us today such opportunity for praise and worship.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether you think of God being present in a building, or in people, and what is the difference?
2. Share any experiences you may have had of journeying to celebrate a festival occasion such as Christmas with others away from your normal home.