BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies In Psalms: Songs of Faith

Lesson Six

The Joy of Worshiping God Together

Focal Text
Psalm 84

Background
Psalms 76; 84; 87

Main Idea
Genuinely worshiping God together is an experience of joy.

Question to Explore
Is worshiping God with fellow believers a joy or a chore?

Quick Read
Psalm 84 is our model in preparing to worship God each Sunday and each day.

Commentary
Early in Abraham Lincoln’s adult life, he was a clerk in a story in Salem, Illinois. A story told from those years is about his displaying a beautiful new gun prominently in the store. The little sign under it said it was made from the finest Swedish steel, its stock was produced from the best black walnut wood, and it was created by a world-famous gunsmith. Even so, its price was very reasonable. On the next rack was an old long-barrel Kentucky squirrel rifle made from ordinary gun steel. Its stock was made from ordinary wood. Its gunsmith was competent but by no means famous. But its price was much higher.

One day a farmer looking for a new gun noticed the shiny new rifle. He asked Abe, “Why is the good gun so cheap and the other gun so high?” Abe replied, “That gun won’t shoot. The other one will.” Then he picked up the old rifle, led the farmer outside, sighted a small object a hundred yards away, and hit it dead center. The farmer bought the squirrel gun.
Some time later, a rich farmer was decorating a room in his new country mansion. He needed a gun to display over the fireplace mantle under the heads of three big game trophies. The fancy gun was perfect for the purpose. Its little plaque, Swedish steel, walnut stock, and famous gunsmith were all impressive. It couldn’t shoot, but that was fine—it was just for show.

Sometimes our faith is more for the mantle than the street. We can be tempted to come to church so others will be impressed with us. We can worship so others will notice; we can prepare and teach Bible studies so others will know how much we know. I’m tempted to write this commentary today so you will be impressed not so much with God’s words as with mine.

Authentic faith, and Bible study, and commentary writing are for God. He is the audience of One. And God makes genuine worship and service effective in his kingdom.

How do we choose such worship this Sunday? Why should we?

_Sing the “songs of Zion”_  
We met the “sons of Korah” in lesson 4, when we studied Psalms 42—43. The “sons of Korah” were the authors of Psalms 42—49, 84—85, and 87—88. Remember that they were a family descended from Levi through his son Kohath, and that they formed the temple choir. One of their number, a musician named Heman, was their leader during David’s reign (1 Chronicles 6:33).

Psalm 84 is part of a category known as “songs of praise to Zion” (see Psalms 46; 48; 76; 87; 122). Each offers praise to Zion, the dwelling place of the Lord.

“Zion” is found in the Bible first with regard to David’s conquest of Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:6-10). “Mount Zion” is the area where the city had been established. Over time, “Zion” came to refer to Jerusalem, to the temple built there by Solomon (see Psalm 2:6), and to the entire Jewish nation (see Isaiah 1:27). Isaiah also spoke of Zion as the city of God in the new age (Isa. 1:27; 28:16; 33:5).

Songs to Zion were intended to prepare worshipers for their service to God in the temple and the holy city. Like the “Pilgrim Psalms,” which were sung on the journey to Jerusalem (Ps. 120—134), they helped lead God’s people into his presence. They were used especially during the seven feasts of the Jewish calendar, as follows:

- _Purim_ (celebrated on March 4 in 2007), commemorating the deliverance of the Jewish people from wicked Haman in the Book of Esther.
- _Passover_ (observed on April 3 in 2007), when the people remembered their deliverance from Egypt.
- _Pentecost_ (fifty days after Passover, on May 23 in 2007), when the people celebrated the grain harvest and the giving of the law to Moses.
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- **Feast of Trumpets**, or Rosh Hashanah (celebrated on September 23 of 2006, the year 5767 on the Jewish calendar), a celebration that led to ten days of fasting, repentance, and spiritual preparation.
- **Day of Atonement**, or Yom Kippur (observed in 2006 on October 2), the day when the high priest made sacrifice for the sins of the nation.
- **Feast of Tabernacles** (October 7 of 2006), when the people gave thanksgiving for God’s gifts across the year and lived in temporary booths or huts to remember their wilderness wanderings.
- **Feast of Lights**, or Hanukkah (December 16 of 2006), when the people celebrated the restoration of the temple by Judas Maccabaeus in 164 B.C. (see John 10:22, where Jesus attended this feast at the temple).

The Jewish people were expected to observe each of these feasts. They were required to return to Zion and the temple for Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. The “songs of Zion” would help them prepare spiritually for their pilgrimage. These songs were often sung during the journey and as the people made their way up the steps to the temple.

Of course, we do not worship God on Mount Zion in an earthly temple. Rather, we are the temple of God today (1 Corinthians 3:16): “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?” We can use Psalm 84 and similar psalms to prepare our hearts for worship today and this Sunday. In fact, we should.

**Learn how to worship God (84:1-9)**

A few years ago in Great Britain, the government ministry in charge of bus transportation got a rash of complaints that almost empty buses were driving past lines of riders without stopping. When the bureau investigated, the drivers said they needed to hurry past the crowded bus stops in order to maintain their schedules. They thought it was more important to be on time than to pick up passengers.

Nothing is more important than our worship of God. In fact, worship is how we will spend eternity. We were made to worship our Maker. When we rush through a church service without connecting our minds and hearts with our Father, we have wasted our time and God’s invitation. The template for genuine worship that we see in Psalm 84 will help us meet the One who is waiting for us today.

**Worship with passion**

The psalm begins (Ps. 84:1-2):

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

There is easily a week’s worth of material in these two verses and their description of ways the sons of Korah came to worship with passion. They began by expressing their
love for God. “How lovely is your dwelling place” is better translated, how much we love your dwelling place. “O Lord Almighty” is the English rendering that means O God of all power and might, who was, is, and ever shall be.

The psalmist proclaimed that his “soul” (inner being, inmost person) “yearns” (seeks earnestly), “even faints” with passion and exhaustion, for the “courts” or presence of the Lord. The psalmist’s “heart” (internal seat of will, emotions, and intellect) and “flesh” (external being) cried out for the “living,” present-tense, real God.

The psalmist sought God with all his being, as he yearned to express his love for his Lord. When last did you come to worship like this? When will you next?

Seek God’s presence in praise
The psalmist next noted that the sparrow and swallow lived near the altar of God, “O Lord Almighty, my King and my God” (84:3). As these birds were able to fly into the temple and build their nests near God’s altar, so the psalmist wanted to join them in his heart. Every part of God’s creation is God’s, and every part of God’s creation praises him. So the psalmist would call him “my” King and “my” God—not just the or even our King and God, but the psalmist’s personal Lord.

The psalmist sought to join those “who dwell in your house” in constant praise, not just occasional observance (84:4). They “are ever praising you,” and he would join their blessing and joy.

The psalmist sought God’s presence as his continual experience and lifestyle. He practiced the presence of God all through the day, not just when he was in the temple. When last did you worship God on Monday as fully as on Sunday?

Worship God in all circumstances
Much of Israel is dry, arid land, especially for pilgrims coming from the more fertile plains to the north. Yet those coming to the temple “have set their hearts on pilgrimage” (84:5), for their “strength is in you” for the difficult journey ahead.

They would “pass through the Valley of Baca” (84:6), literally the Valley of Weeping (although the phrase can also be translated Valley of Balsam Trees). This is not a specific place in Israel as far as we know, but a symbol for the pain of pilgrimage through life. But their worship will “make it a place of springs” of joy. They will find “pools” from the “autumn rains” to refresh their souls. So “they go from strength to strength,” from one provision by God to another, no matter the obstacles they must face.

Are life’s hard times keeping you from worshiping your Father? It is human nature to turn our backs on God when God disappoints us. Yet we need a doctor most when we are most sick. The times we most need to worship God are the times when we least want to worship God. Is any part of the desert keeping you from the showers of blessing God gives those who worship him?
Worship with personal engagement

Now the psalmist pleaded with God to hear his personal cry (84:8-9):

> Hear my prayer, O Lord God Almighty;  
> listen to me, O God of Jacob.  
> Look upon our shield, O God;  
> look with favor on your anointed one.

God is the “God of Jacob,” the God of their fathers and their past. Now the psalmist prayed that God would be his God of the present. The psalmist’s prayer and worship were not generic or ambiguous, but the expression of his own heart and soul. His specific prayer was an intercession for the “shield” of the nation, referring to the king. He asked the Lord to “look with favor” and blessing on “your anointed one,” David or his successors.

While the psalmist’s personal prayer was centered on the king of that day, his model calls us to personal, specific worship and intercession for any issue burdening our souls. We have not because we ask not (James 4:2). Our worship must be as personally engaged as the psalmist’s, if we are to meet God as the psalmist did.

John Wesley was rescued from a burning building when he was a child. This experience of being saved by a loving God who deserved his worship never left him. In serving that God, he traveled 250,000 miles on horseback, averaging 20 miles a day for forty years; he preached thousands of sermons and produced several hundred books; and he learned to use ten languages.

Wesley knew something about true worship: we come to God with passion, with constant and consistent commitment, no matter our circumstances. Is the psalmist’s model yours?

**Know why to worship God (84:10-12)**

In ancient times, some kings believed that God would direct them through their dreams. If they needed help with a decision, they would try to dream and thus receive a word from the Lord. If they weren’t receiving a message while dreaming in their own beds, they would sleep in the temple, believing that God would speak to them there (see 1 Kings 3:4-15; 2 Chronicles 1:2-13). Thus originated the time-honored tradition of sleeping in church. (Everything I just wrote is true, except the last sentence.)

It’s been said that the problem with the typical worship service is that it begins at 11:00 sharp and ends at 12:00 dull. If we don’t remember why we worship, we will have difficulty applying the ways to worship that we have learned.

We worship God because we find joy and significance in God’s presence (84:10). The phrase “a doorkeeper in the house of” the Lord may have described the psalmist’s normal service at the temple (see 2 Kings 22:4). Perhaps he was an usher or some sort of
secondary worship leader. But such a humble position was far superior to the “tents of the wicked,” no matter the size and grandeur of such tents.

We worship God because we receive blessing and joy in return (Ps. 84:11). He is our “sun” of glory and “shield” of protection. God gives “favor” (unmerited gifts), “honor,” and every “good thing” to those who “walk” or live in his word and will.

In summary, “blessed is the man who trusts” in the Lord. When we give our passionate, consistent, obedient personal worship to the Father, we experience joy and significance that far repay our effort. As a farmer explained his sacrificial stewardship: “I shovel into God’s bin and God shovels into mine, but he’s got the bigger shovel.”

However, note that the psalmist was not offering a health and wealth, prosperity gospel. We must not see Psalm 84 as God’s guarantee of financial or material wealth when we worship. Nothing in the psalm specifies material prosperity beyond our needs. The psalm does promise that the Father rewards his children with what our souls need most. But we worship God not for what God gives in return, but for who God is.

**Conclusion**

Today you are preparing your heart to ascend to the Zion of God’s worship with your church family this weekend. Too, you are invited into the presence of your Father right now. Psalm 84 gives us an enduring template to follow: worship God with passion; seek God’s presence in continual praise no matter your circumstances; make worship your personal commitment to your Lord.

When we worship like this, we are “blessed” in return (Ps. 84:4, 5, 12). But if we worship in order to be blessed, we have not worshiped. We offer God our praise and commitment because God is worthy of them. Then God responds to our worship with the blessing of his best.

Three years ago, my oldest son and I were privileged to join 25,000 college students on a farm outside of Sherman, Texas, for an event called OneDay03. It was one of the most powerful worship experiences of my life. The weekend before the event began, however, a horrific thunderstorm swept through the area. Lightning hit some of the students, although none were seriously injured. Wind swept away dozens of tents, so that students slept on gym floors. Many lost clothes, food, everything.

When Louie Giglio, the organizer of the event, stood to welcome the students the next day, he recounted all they had endured—the storms, the rain, the sleepless nights. I thought he was going to thank them for their sacrifice and patience. Instead he said, “And our God is worth all that.”

He was right.