

Psalm 84: A song for when you'd rather be somewhere else

If you could be *anywhere* else right now, where would you choose? Psalm 84 is a song for those who'd rather be somewhere else.

Though we can't be certain about the psalmists' exact circumstances, one thing is clear. They are longing for a place far away.

That place is the temple in Jerusalem; the courts of the LORD. It's a place that's lovely to the psalmists. Their whole being, inside and out, longs to be in the temple.

Why? Because it's the dwelling-place of the living God.

One of the convictions unique to the ancient people of Israel was that their God wasn't just a small, local god – but the Lord of lords and King of kings. That's why their Scriptures open with Genesis – with a God who creates everything and everyone.

But they also believed that God had chosen to dwell with them – to live among them – in a special way.

After rescuing them from Egypt, God instructs his people to build an ornate tent called the tabernacle. He then fills it with his glorious presence to be with them.

Generations later this tent is replaced by a permanent temple building – even more grand and spectacular. God's glorious presence fills it again, just like the tabernacle. God has come to live among his people.

The psalmists' longing for the temple, then, isn't so much a desire to admire its architecture, but to be in the place where God dwells. They long for the living God himself.

Verses 3 and 4 take it further. The psalmists reflect that, ornate as the temple was, no law prevented birds from nesting in its rafters. Perhaps they'd even seen families of birds there.

And in this image, the psalmists see something of God's welcome.

Look at the birds they mention. Sparrows: they were cheap to buy, common birds at the time. And Sparrows apparently poo more than almost any other bird. They're messy. Yet *these birds* can nest in the presence of the Lord. Do you see the point? Even the apparently insignificant and messy can find a home with the living God.

And it's not just birds that find a welcome. The psalmists see the temple as a place they can call home – a place to belong.

And so they sing:

Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.

And:

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

A doorkeeper was a little like a bouncer – it's a pretty menial job. The psalmists who wrote this song, the sons of Korah, were themselves doorkeepers. Yet God's presence is so glorious that even menial work in the temple is a delight.

How good it is to be in the courts of the LORD, and to be near to him in all his majesty!

No wonder that, away from the temple, almost every verse of the psalm pulsates with a longing to be back there.

Yet, rather than filling the psalmists with despair, it's precisely this longing which keeps them going.

Journeying back to the temple would have meant passing through dry valleys – hard and thirsty work for weary travellers. But the psalm gives a striking picture.

Because the destination is so wonderful, the journey isn't so much painful and hard, as it is loaded with joy and anticipation. Strength to endure the journey builds as the psalmists remember where they're going. It's as if this hope makes even the dry valleys 'a place of springs', pools on the road side providing strength and nourishment. They know they are heading home, to the presence of God.

The psalmists were far from where they wanted to be. But, as they delighted in the welcome that awaited them, they found strength even in the wilderness. They knew that, in the bigger picture, they were on a journey home – and therefore no step was wasted.

When you long for a destination, your journey there is transformed. You can know joy and anticipation, even in the driest valley. Getting up at 3am to catch a flight is always painful – but you'll do it gladly if it takes you where you want to be.

Hundreds of years later, the Apostle Paul described what it's like living as a follower of Jesus today:

We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

As Christians, says Paul, we have somewhere we'd much rather be! We would rather be at *home* with the Lord – a home we cannot see yet, but that that we know awaits us.

This home is ours because of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. Even though our rebellion against him – our track record of choosing our own path – ought to separate us from

God, Jesus died so that we can be brought back to Him. Like the most insignificant and messy of birds, Jesus offers a warm welcome to each of us.

We experience some of that welcome now, but we'll know it fully when we reach the future destination promised to all who trust God. A world made new, like a new temple – a place where God and humanity will dwell together for all time, never-ending, never-fading. It's a place each one of us can call home, a true home where we find the deepest sense of safety and belonging imaginable.

It's a place free from suffering and tears, free from death, and free from wickedness. Above all, it's a place where we can enjoy the presence of God forever.

It's the place we were made for; the place we belong.

And so as we suffer and struggle in this world, it's not surprising that we should find ourselves longing and lovesick for this place. Psalm 84 tunes our hearts to long for this home all the more.

And meditating on this wonderful future destination can transform us and give us fresh strength to endure the journey there.

The dry valleys of this life may be hard, but a true home awaits us.