



Sunday, September 6, 2026 - Hearts Set on Pilgrimage – Pastor John Henry Raskin

The blessed life is the pilgrim life: receiving strength from God, walking faithfully through hard places, and shining Christ's light so others can find the road to righteousness.

Key Scriptures

Psalm 84:5–8 — Blessed are those whose strength is in God and whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

Daniel 12:3 — The wise shine like stars as they turn many to righteousness.

Sermon Summary

Psalm 84 describes believers as pilgrims on the road toward God's presence. The blessing is not for those who are strong in themselves, but for those who know their strength comes from the Lord. Their hearts are not scattered; they are set on the journey toward Him.

The road includes the Valley of Baca, the valley of weeping. Pilgrims do not avoid it; they pass through it. As they keep walking in faith, God turns dry and difficult places into springs. He may not remove the hard road, but He meets His people on it and gives strength for the next step.

Daniel 12:3 completes the picture: pilgrims are also called to shine. As followers of Jesus, we do not keep our faith hidden. We walk closely with Christ so His light is seen in our patience, kindness, hope, perseverance, and witness to others.

Takeaways for the Week

1. Set your heart toward God. Let Him be your strength, not your own effort or control.
2. Keep walking through Baca. Do not pretend the valley is easy, but trust God to bring springs there.
3. Receive today's strength. God gives grace step by step, from strength to strength.
4. Shine on the road. Let your visible hope point someone else toward righteousness.

Reflections

Where do I need to stop relying on my own strength and receive strength from God?

What "Valley of Baca" am I walking through, and how might God be bringing refreshment there?

Who near me needs to see Christ's light through my faith, hope, or perseverance?

Lord God of hosts, give us strength for the pilgrim road. Turn our weeping places into springs, carry us from strength to strength, and make our lives shine with the light of Jesus.

HEARTS SET ON PILGRIMAGE

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week we explored the scriptures that revealed to us that the Tree of Life that was forbidden us after the Fall, is Jesus Christ Himself, the Lord of Creation.

We saw how believers, through faith in Christ, have the invitation and the ability to return to the Garden through Christ as The Way, and partake of Him as the Tree of Life for our sustenance both spiritual and physical.

Today, we are going to camp out in two places in the Old Testament which will illuminate further the Way of the faithful and how it relates to who we are in Christ Jesus.

Let's begin with this beautiful passage in Psalms.

Psalms 84:5-8

5 Blessed is the man whose strength is in You, Whose heart is set on pilgrimage.

6 As they pass through the Valley of Baca, They make it a spring; The rain also covers it with pools.

7 They go from strength to strength; Each one appears before God in Zion.

8 O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; Give ear, O God of Jacob.

Notice that this piece of scripture begins with a blessing.

It is the same blessing structure that Jesus uses in the beatitudes.

Note that it is a blessing for those whose focus is in one direction but in two parts.

Blessed is the man whose strength is in You, Whose heart is set on pilgrimage.

The blessing is not necessarily for someone who is strong physically, emotionally, or even spiritually.

The blessing, the Psalm tells us, is for those who are, as Jesus put it, “poor in spirit”. Those who know they have no strength in themselves, but what the Lord gives to them.

They are the ones who Jesus says, will possess the “Kingdom of Heaven”.

Then it tells us that the person whose strength is in God is also one whose heart is set on pilgrimage.

Both things.

Trusting in the Lord for strength and hearts set on pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage is a word that you may have heard growing up if you were raised Catholic or in some other sect or denomination where yearly voyages were made to sites that were deemed holy.

But the way this word is used in the psalms here is the same way that Jesus meant it in the Gospel of Luke as He began His final journey to Jerusalem and the Cross.

“when the time had come for Him to be received up”, Luke tells us, “He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem”

Jesus was setting His face, His heart, on the final part of His pilgrimage, His sojourn on earth as a human being.

His heart was set on completing His mission

I want you to think for a moment about the last long trip you took.

Maybe it was a drive across the state, or a flight to see family, or a long hike up a mountain to see something beautiful.

Somewhere along the way, I'm sure you got tired.

That is exactly the picture in front of us this morning.

Psalm 84 was written for people on a journey — pilgrims walking the long, dusty road up to Jerusalem, up to the temple, up to the very presence of God.

And the psalmist tells us something wonderful: the blessed life is not the life that never has to travel hard roads.

The blessed life is the life of a person whose heart is set toward God even while they are still on the way.

That is what our pilgrimage means, church.

Being a true follower of Jesus is not about being satisfied that we have already arrived.

It is knowing and accepting that we are on a pilgrimage together, moving — steadily, faithfully, hopefully — toward the presence of God.

Now watch what happens next, in verse six.

**6 As they pass through the Valley of Baca, They make it a spring;
The rain also covers it with pools.**

Baca was a real place along the pilgrim road — a dry, barren valley.

The name itself means the “Valley of Weeping”.

It was the hard stretch, the part of the journey nobody looked forward to.

But notice what the pilgrims do. They do not go around Baca. It is a part of the well-worn road to Zion.

They do not skip that part of the journey. They pass through it — and as they pass through it, God turns it into a spring.

More specifically the scripture says, they... WE make it a spring.

Our faith, and our trust in the Living God for HIS strength to go through that valley makes the very place of weeping become a place of refreshment.

As it happens, Baca is the name of both the valley and the balsam trees that grow there, plants that thrive in dry, difficult ground.

May we have the faith to become like those trees, beloved.

With that faith, the valley of tears becomes, in God's hands, a place where something good can grow.

The valley of weeping becomes a place of provision, simply because the pilgrims keep walking through it with their hearts set on God.

Some of you are in your own Valley of Baca right now.

Some of you came in this morning carrying a heavy burden.

I want you to hear this psalm speaking directly to you today, because this is a psalm for people who are going through hard situations.

A bad diagnosis. A devastating loss of finances.

A relationship that broke. A great job that ended.

A season where the ground under your feet feels dry and hard and impossible to navigate.

I want you to hear this psalm saying to you: you do not have to pretend the valley is not dry. But you do not have to stay stuck there either.

Keep walking with your heart set on God, trusting Him to do what only He can do — and He will turn your weeping valley into a spring.

This is not a promise that the hard road suddenly disappears.

It is a promise that God will meet you on it.

And know this: the rain He sends is not always the rain you expect.

Sometimes it comes through a friend who calls at just the right moment.

Sometimes it comes through a verse of Scripture that lands right where you need it.

Sometimes it is simply the quiet strength He will give you to take one more step.

But the pools will come, church, because God is faithful to pilgrims who keep walking toward Him.

Then Verse seven says, “

Psalm 84:7

They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion.

I love this line, because it tells us something about the true Christian life. It is not one dramatic leap to maturity.

It is strength to strength. Step by step. Season after season.

A little more grace here, a little more faith there, until one day we find ourselves standing in the smiling presence of God, marveling at how far He has brought us and He says, “Well done”.

Notice also that the psalmist is very specific that we go through this valley together but we each arrive before God individually.

Beloved, you are not alone on this pilgrimage.

We here at Abundant Life Church are going through this journey together.

If you feel like your faith is small this morning, take heart.

Nobody in this psalm arrives at Zion in one leap.

They go from strength to strength. The words mean a steady, continual movement.

God is not asking you in any given moment, to have all the strength you will need for the whole journey.

He is only asking you to take today's step, with the strength that He gives for today.

And notice the destination the Psalm describes: each one appears before God.

That is the whole point of the pilgrimage.

Not the seeing of marvelous sights along the way, not even the miraculous springs in the valley that come unexpectedly when you trust in Him...

...those are mercies for the road, not the goal.

The goal is God Himself.

We are simple people, walking a simple road, headed toward one thing: the presence of the Lord.

Now in verse eight, the focus shifts again.

The psalmist stops describing the pilgrims and starts praying himself:

Psalm 84:8

O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God o Jacob.

This is important. Pilgrimage is not a program you complete and then you check it off the spiritual bucket list.

It is a relationship that you keep returning to in prayer.

Notice the psalmist calls out to the God of Jacob.

Jacob was no super-saint.

He was a schemer, a man who wrestled with God and walked away with a limp.

And yet the God of Jacob heard him, held him, and kept him on the road all the way home.

If you feel like a Jacob this morning — flawed, limping, not at all sure you will ever deserve to be called blessed — this verse is for you.

The God who heard Jacob's prayer hears yours too.

So here is the simple pattern of this psalm for our own lives:

Set your heart toward God, walk through whatever valley you are in, trust Him for strength for today, and keep praying the whole way.

That is the pilgrim life. It is not complicated.

It is simply faithful.

Now I want to move to another piece of scripture from the Prophet Daniel, that I find both compelling and encouraging in my own life because I believe it answers a question that the psalm leaves open.

If we are pilgrims passing through this world, what are we supposed to be doing along the way?

Daniel 12:3

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.

The Hebrew word that Daniel uses here for shine is “zahar”.

It describes a light that warns and instructs, it’s the same word that Ezekiel uses for a watchman giving a warning to others.

It means shining a light to guide others safely.

It is not a private glow — it is a light meant to be seen and followed.

Do you see how these two passages fit together?

Psalms 84 tells us we are pilgrims passing through this world, with our hearts set on God.

Daniel tells us that as we pass through, we are meant to shine.

We are not meant to walk through the darkness of this world quietly, keeping our light to ourselves.

We are meant to be like the stars that Daniel describes — visible lights, on our pilgrimage with Jesus, faithfully pointing the way, so that others walking in the dark can find their bearings by us.

You do not need a pulpit to shine like this. You do not need a seminary degree.

Daniel says it is the wise... those who simply know and love and follow God, who shine, and those who turn even one other person toward righteousness will shine like the stars forever.

That could be you, this week, with a neighbor. With a coworker. With a grandchild.

With someone in this very room who is walking through their own Valley of Baca and needs to see that the road can be walked in faith and yes, even joy.

This is what it means to follow Jesus closely as we go through this place.

He did not come to give us private hidden faith.

He said, "You are the light of the world."

He is the light we follow, and He is the light that shines out of us onto the road for others.

The closer we walk with Him, the more of His light shows up in our ordinary lives...

In our patience, in our kindness, in our visible hope in hard seasons, in our willingness to keep walking instead of giving up through our own Valleys of Baca.

So let me bring this all together, simply.

This world is not our home. We are pilgrims here, passing through...

Through good days and through hard seasons.

Our strength is not in ourselves; it is in the Lord who sits at the right hand of the Throne of Grace.

Our hearts should not be scattered in fifty directions; but set, fixed, on the path that leads to our destiny, our Calvary, our Cross and on to the road that leads to His presence.

As we walk that road together, God promises to turn our hardest places into springs.

He does not promise that the path will be easy.

He promises His presence on the road, strength for strength, step by step, until we stand before Him.

And along the way, He calls us to shine — not to hide our faith, not to walk through this dark world unnoticed, but to be the kind of light that helps someone else find the road.

So, this week, seek God in everything you do in your kitchen, in your job, in your car, in your pain.

Follow Jesus closely, one step at a time.

And let your life shine, plainly and faithfully, so that someone near you finds their way toward righteousness because they were near you.

That is the pilgrim road. That is the blessed life. That is the Abundant Life.

Let us set our hearts on it together.

And now let's pray...