



Studies in the Psalms Keys to the Joyful Life 4

Summary: The joyful life is found by people whose hearts are oriented toward God and whose lives are fueled by His strength.

There are three essential components to the Christian life. Three things you have to know to understand the basics of what it means to be Christian. They're not hard, but they're essential. You need to know that Christianity involves God-given direction, forgiveness and strength; all three, not one or two, but all three, because they rest on each other.

Some people look to religion for direction – a set of rules for life, a moral code, do this, don't do that. That's true of all religions, even atheists or agnostics look for direction and meaning in life. Christians find it in the Bible, the Word of God.

Some people look to religion for forgiveness – we all have a sense of guilt and shame at times because we know we've done things wrong. We haven't been the person we hoped to be, haven't made the choices we wish we had, and we look for something to make that right. Christians find forgiveness through the cross of Jesus Christ. We believe He took all our guilt, shame, and failures and suffered for us on the cross – we believe there was an exchange, that He suffered in our place because He had never done anything wrong or shameful Himself, never failed or come up short.

And then, some people look to religion for strength. So, they wear a necklace to remind them some god is with them, or they make a certain prayer to tap into divine energy. They might make a sacrifice or offering to win the favor of god or the gods - they know they need help and so they turn to the heavens and what powers may be. For Christians this strength comes from the indwelling power and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

So, to be a Christian means you look to God for direction in life, receive forgiveness through Christ when you blow it or don't measure up, and ask the Holy Spirit for the strength you need. But all three must go together, they interlock, and give our lives shape and meaning.

I say all of that by way of introduction because we are in the middle of a study in the Psalms this summer looking at the keys to the blessed life. We've discovered there's a phrase that keeps popping up throughout the Psalms, "[blessed is the man who...](#)" and different Psalms describe what a blessed, or happy, or joy-filled life looks like. Today we have come to Psalm 84 which can be summarized as saying: *blessed are those whose hearts are oriented toward God and whose lives are fueled by His strength.*

As we read watch for three different clear statements about who or what is blessed, and along the way some of you will recognize the roots of a worship song you've sung before, Better is One Day in Your courts than thousands elsewhere. We read:

To the Chief Musician. On an instrument of Gath. A Psalm of the sons of Korah.

PS 84:1 How lovely *is* Your tabernacle, (or dwelling place)
O LORD of hosts! (NIV – LORD Almighty; host is an archaic term for a large number
i.e. a whole host of memories, often referred to an army)
2 My soul longs, yes, even faints
For the courts of the LORD;
My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

The Psalm represents the desire to in the place of worship, in this case the Temple in Jerusalem. Some of you felt this way this morning, after the week you've had, you couldn't wait to be here, in church.

3 Even the sparrow has found a home,
And the swallow a nest for herself,
Where she may lay her young—
Even Your altars, O LORD of hosts,
My King and my God.
4 Blessed *are* those who dwell in Your house;
They will still be praising You. Selah

Now, that's a musical term that means pause, reflect, let what was just said sink in.

When most people think of Arlington National Cemetery they think of a big lawn of green grass with white marble headstones or they think of the Tomb of the Unknown soldier. But the place is filled with wildlife too.

Some sections are heavily forested. Two weeks ago I watched a big beautiful 8-point buck munching some plants in a remote part of the cemetery and I thought, you know, he's got it pretty good. What's to worry about? He lives on a gated installation with no natural predators, where no one can hunt and they have a dedicated grounds crew to make sure the plants are thriving. That buck is living in deer paradise. And that's what the Psalmist is thinking about when he envies the tiny birds that live in the Temple courts – what a great thing that would be.

He goes on,

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

Some of you hear pilgrimage and you immediately start to think of black shoes with buckles, big hats, multicolored corn and a harvest party – you think of Plymouth Rock and Thanksgiving.

Pilgrims are actually people on a trip. In the case of Thanksgiving, it was people that made a trip to America from Europe. But some of you have a family tradition of making a pilgrimage to your grandma's house or your cousins' house each Christmas. In this Psalm, it's people traveling to the city of Jerusalem for one of their religious feasts.

The Psalm says blessed is the man or woman whose heart is set on being near to God. Blessed is the person who desires that trip to go worship more than anything else, because they're going to find strength from God and be a blessing to others, *even when life is hard*. Watch what happens next:

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.*

If you know much about the Middle East today you may know there is a Beka Valley in Lebanon. There is no connection here. In fact, scholars cannot identify exactly where this valley is, and many suggest that's because it's not an actual place, it's an idea. People traveled from the North, South, East and West to come to the Temple in Jerusalem. There's more than one way to get there, which means not everyone would pass through a physical valley on their pilgrimage, if there was an actual Valley of Baca.

But Baca means weeping and it very likely that what the Psalmist is saying here is, when they go through hard times, they turn it into something helpful for others and they receive help themselves from God.

It is really, really, easy for us to forget how hard it is to travel in most places in the world. And how difficult travel has been for most of history. When you look at places where large cities have sprung up, even right here with Washington DC, they tend to be near places that were easily accessible by water or had access to a natural source because people need to drink to live and water is heavy to carry with you.

So, in the ancient world if there was no stream or lake, people would dig for water, they would search for springs and build wells. You read about this in the Old Testament, how Abraham and later Isaac dug wells and how people later fought over access to them. Water was and is valuable.

So, the Psalmist says, when the people whose hearts are set on God go through the Valley of Baca, the valley of weeping, seasons of difficulty in their lives, they actually make it a spring. They dig down and find water. *They discover refreshment in the desert.*

And at other times, *while they're going through difficulty*, God sends them rain from above instead. Both things are true. Sometimes they find refreshment by seeking and searching for it, and other times it just shows up spontaneously - seemingly out of nowhere - like one of the sudden summer storms that have been pouring down on us these past few weeks.

So, here's what you need to see: the Psalmist is saying, it's not always easy to make a pilgrimage – sometimes you have to go through the valley of weeping - *even though you're on your way to worship*.

Let that sink in. Because, we tend to think, 'if I'm trying to do the right thing, life should go well. I shouldn't have to put with setbacks, frustrations, or opposition. I shouldn't have to deal with things not going right or being hard, *I'm on my way to go worship God*. Or, I'm trying to do what pleases God, I should have a divinely issued E-Z pass that lets me cruise by all those other people snarled in the traffic of life.'

Not so. Even those whose hearts are set on pilgrimage will go through the Valley of Baca, the Valley of Weeping. They will go through dry, dusty, difficult stretches of life. But they will search out sources of water, they will dig new wells, and they will experience sudden storms that actually bring them much needed rain.

Notice what he says next:

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.*

If your heart is set on pilgrimage, if your heart is set on seeking God, the journey or trials in life *actually make you stronger*. Most people go through life moving from strength to weakness. The journey wears you out. But those whose hearts are set on God, those who desire God, those who sing, "*how lovely is Your dwelling place*" somehow increase in strength as they go.

And they make it. *Each one appears before God in Zion*. They reach their destination, by His grace and with His help.

Church, I need you to hear, see, understand and believe Scripture. I need you to see and know and believe that you can go *from strength to strength*, you don't have to be worn down by life, your best days are not behind you, God can and will refresh, renew, and reinvigorate you as you seek Him. Your physical body will wear out, but physical strength is not the only form of strength and physical beauty is not the only form of beauty.

Scripture says *do not let people despise your youth (1Tim 4:12)*, but it also esteems the mature, the senior, the experienced, those who have learned to walk with God through trials, those who have their passport stamped in the Valley of Baca many times. Scripture says it is possible to go *from strength to strength* and not grow weary, cynical, or depressed as you *age if your heart is set on God and you find your strength in Him*.

8 O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;

Give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah

Again, this pause, think about these things. Let them sink in and settle down in your heart, mind, and soul.

9 O God, behold our shield,
And look upon the face of Your anointed.

Here the Psalmist offers a quick prayer for the king – God’s anointed ruler over the country and the capital where the Temple is found. He prays: God work through Your appointed leader and do us good, may it continue to be safe for us to come and worship in this place.

10 For a day in Your courts *is* better than a thousand.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

The Psalmist is aware: there are other ways to live. There are people out there who do not love and worship our God. But I would rather spend a single day here in Your presence God than a thousand days anywhere else. In other words, *‘I don’t think I’m missing out on anything by serving and prioritizing you God.’*

Now, that’s a challenge we all need to face, and we have to work through it on a regular basis. The world always offers you an alternative, another way to live. The doors to their [tents of wickedness](#) are wide open. Where do you want to be?

Some of you have the tremendous privilege of growing up in a godly home. You first came to church strapped into a car seat as an infant and you’ve been here ever since. You have the privilege of growing up in a home with mom and dad – which is a gift. According to the census bureau the US has the world’s highest rate of single parent homes:

“Almost a quarter of U.S. children under the age of 18 live with one parent and no other adults (23%), [which is] more than three times the [global rate] (7%) ...¹

Many of you are blessed to have both parents in your house. I didn’t grow up that way. My wife didn’t grow up that way, but by God’s grace my kids are and so are many of you. And not only do you have both mom and dad, they love each other and they love you.

Now, they’re not perfect. They make mistakes. They make bad calls. But they’re trying. And not only do they love each other and love you, they love God. Which, for some of you, is actually the source of your frustration at times.

They say yes to some things and no to other things that you don’t like or understand because they’re trying to honor, please, and obey God as parents. They believe there are things that will make your life better and things that will make your life worse, and that

¹ <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/stories/single-parent-day.html>

active, intentional parenting can be a source of friction for you at times, but I'm telling you, it's meant to be a blessing. They're trying to do you good.

Meanwhile, you see and hear about the stuff happening over in the [tents of wickedness](#). You hear it from your friends, you see it online, you might even hear about it from other kids at church. The [tents of wickedness](#) are wide open and calling out.

And you have to decide – is it really better to be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord? Is it really better to spend a day with God than a thousand elsewhere? That choice has to be your own. Because when you're young, mom and dad may drag you along on their pilgrimage, but as you grow up it increasingly becomes your choice. Is your heart set on pilgrimage? Are you going from [strength to strength](#)? Do you believe these things?

And the question doesn't go away as you grow up. Because the tents of the wicked never go away. They're always right over there. You know exactly where they are and how to find them. And you will have to decide over and over again in life, where do I want to spend the night? Which way do I want to live? Remember I said earlier, we all need direction, forgiveness, and strength. Well, what direction are you headed, what kind of pilgrimage are you on? Where are you turning for help and strength?

Look at how this ends

[11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
The LORD will give grace and glory;
No good *thing* will He withhold
From those who walk uprightly.](#)

Would you highlight this verse, star it, underline it, mark it in some distinctive way so you can come back and meditate on it? Chew on it, think of what it means for you.

[11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
The LORD will give grace and glory;
No good *thing* will He withhold
From those who walk uprightly.](#)

I want you to notice: this Psalm is full of delight and joy and praise. Look at our third blessing:

[12 O LORD of hosts,
Blessed is the man who trusts in You!](#)

Does this sound like the song of a man who feels like he's missing out on something?

Not at all. This is the song of a man who has discovered the source of true joy, happiness, and meaning in life and has developed a worldview that even incorporates seasons spent in the Valley of Baca, the Valley of Weeping.

This is the song of those who understand the offer of the wicked, who understand the temptation of their tents, but who have tasted and seen that the Lord is good and have chosen, willfully, intentionally, deliberately, defiantly, to pursue God believing that a single day in His presence is better than a thousand elsewhere.

So let me give you something else to consider. Where was the Temple? In Jerusalem, the capital city. There was no other city like it in the lives of most Jews. It was the biggest, most diverse city most of them would ever visit in their entire lives.

It was the center of politics and commerce and education. If you couldn't find it in Jerusalem, you probably weren't going to find it anywhere else. I think that's important for you to know because today we tend to idealize natural settings. We think of getting away from the city and going to the mountains or the beach. And so, it might be natural to think of God's Temple in some remote place. Some quiet place, down a long, secluded trail.

But it wasn't. It was right smack in the middle of the hustle and bustle of city life. And it was there that God sought to compete for the attention and affections of people. You had to pass through the city gates, pass the nice houses, pass the king's compound, pass all the merchant stalls, and say "not now, I'm on my way to worship."

So, this is not the worship of the ignorant or the simple. It is the worship of those who know all the other things life has to offer, who hear all the other things that cry out for attention, and who choose to seek God in the middle of it all.

It may feel easier to connect with God in the wilderness, on some trail, under the stars, *but that's not where the Temple was*. And friends, that's not where we are either. We are here, in this city, at this time in history, with all these other things and people calling out for our attention and affection, *and this is where we must seek to know God*.

This is also where we will be blessed with strength if our hearts are set on pilgrimage.

Our pilgrimage today is different though. We no longer make trips to the Temple. It doesn't even exist in Jerusalem any more, you see people going to visit the Western or Wailing Wall, part of its former foundation but the Temple doesn't exist, because it's no longer needed.

The Jews went to the Temple to find forgiveness and fellowship through a system of sacrifices and offerings – a system that pointed toward Jesus, the lamb of God who would one day come and lay down His life as the perfect, comprehensive, sacrifice. The One who never did anything wrong, suffered the wrong all of us have done.

The One who never entered the tents of the wicked opened the doors of the Temple to us. We no longer take a trip a few times a year to visit the place where God dwelled, we have full and free access into His presence at any time.

This is the God we worship. The God who gives us direction for life. The God who offers forgiveness when we fail – who doesn't sell it to us, or make us earn it, but offers it freely because He has already made the sacrifice and paid the price. We worship the God who offers us strength, in fact, offers to increase our strength as we go, through the presence and gifts of His Spirit in us.

Church, I hope your heart is set on pilgrimage. I hope you find and experience the joy that comes from being strengthened by God for the journey you're on. I hope our time together this morning has been encouraging for you and reminded of you what you already know and believe.

But it's possible some of us have gotten off course. We either woke up in the tents of the wicked or we're veering off in that direction. Come back. The Father's arms are open wide. He will welcome you. He's the God of the prodigal son. Even if you knew better. He's the God who told Peter to forgive seventy times seven times if someone repents.

It's also very likely that some of you have never actually been in real fellowship with God. You're more like the person who decides to walk past the Temple since you're in town anyway. You figured you could peek in and see what's happening. But you don't belong. You're an outsider and you know it.

Well, I'm telling you, you can come in. There's no ticket to buy, no password, no secrets you need to know. Just come in. Say, I'm done living life my way. I'm looking for direction from God. I want the forgiveness that comes from Christ. I want to live in God's presence instead of the tents of wickedness and I sure need the strength that comes from God to do things differently from this day forward.

If that's where you are today, take a moment and tell that to God while we pray, and then come up here and receive this small cup of juice and this cracker that remind us of the sacrifice Jesus has made and then join us as we sing to our God of how much better it is to spend one day in His courts than thousands elsewhere.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Studies in the Psalms Keys to the Joyful Life 4

Summary: The joyful life is found by people whose hearts are oriented toward God and whose lives are fueled by His strength.

- Christians receive direction, forgiveness, and strength. Which do you feel the greatest need for in your life right now?
 - How do these three work together?
 - What are the different ways we can get these three out of balance (i.e. seeking strength but not direction, or direction but not forgiveness) and what kind of spiritual experience does that produce?

PS 84:2 My soul longs, yes, even faints
For the courts of the LORD;
My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

- Has there been a time when you really, really, wanted to be in church, or a time when coming to church radically re-energized you with the guidance, forgiveness, or strength you needed?
 - What drove you to that?
 - What did you do as a result?
- Should this level of intensity be normal, or ideal? Should we always feel this way, or is it a snapshot of particular moments in life?

Ps 82:5 Blessed is the man whose strength is in You

- In what ways have you experienced the Lord's strength in your life? How has God helped you achieve or sustain something that you desired to do for Him?
- Have you ever had to pass through the Valley of Baca (Weeping) on your way to worship? Have you watched others go through it? What did you learn?
 - Who is someone you see going from strength to strength as they persistently seek the Lord in life?
- How do you navigate the pull between the tents of the wicked and spending time in the presence of God? Have you done better at some times than others? What helped?
- Consider the following verses to learn more about God's offer of strength: Isaiah 40:31, 41:10; Ephesians 3:14-19 (esp 16); Colossians 1:9-11; 1 Corinthians 1:27; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10