

Psalm 84:5-9

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Those of you who have been around Bon Accord for a while will know that any very occasional musical reference from the pulpit will seldom break through the barrier of the 1980s.

However, today is a new day and I bring you a catchy contemporary composition. Because I'm happy.

That's not the reason I'm doing so, that's the words of the song. Happy by Pharrell Williams was the best selling song on both sides of the Atlantic last year.

Indeed, I'm reliably informed that in September of last year it became the most downloaded song of all time in the UK. I wonder why.

Well, if you're familiar with it, it's catchy and it's happy. We seem to like happy. Now, against my better judgment, I'm going to subject you to the chorus, not sung but read, which includes on four occasions the invitation to clap along.

[1 : 21] Now, just for the avoidance of doubt, I would suggest that you take that metaphorically. But if you want to clap along on the inside, then feel free to do so. Well, the chorus goes along these lines.

Because I'm happy. Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof. Because I'm happy. Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth.

Because I'm happy. Clap along if you know what happiness is to you. Because I'm happy. Clap along if you feel like you want to do. And it's got to be want to do.

Because that's just the way it is in pop songs. It's got to be want to do. I wonder why this song resonates with so many as it clearly does.

The statistics that I've given you in terms of the sales and its popularity, you know, we can't argue with them. It clearly does resonate.

[2 : 20] Why is that? Well, I guess the reason it resonates is that so many people, if they were asked what it is that they want out of life, would probably respond along the lines of, I really just want to be happy.

I'm not saying that would be everybody's answer. But I think it would be a pretty common answer if that question were posed. Now, you've heard the lyrics of the chorus, and I don't think we would describe the lyrics as profound.

And I'm not saying that in some kind of snooty, mocking, or superior way. But there is one line of the chorus that is intriguing. We're told, or the song declares, that happiness is the truth.

Happiness is the truth. What do we make of that? Is that not the wrong way around? Is it not the truth that brings happiness?

The Bible is big on happiness. In the Old Testament, and especially in the Psalms, the word that we find more commonly, the one we're more familiar with from the text of the Psalms, is the word blessed.

[3 : 37] And the word translated blessed, and we find it on three pivotal occasions in the Psalm that we've read, is a Hebrew word that is often and quite properly translated happy.

As I say, in this Psalm, Psalm 84, it performs a pivotal function. Each section of the Psalm revolves around this word.

It ends the first section of the Psalm, then in verse 4, blessed or happy are those who dwell in your house. It begins the next section of the Psalm, blessed or happy are those whose strength is in you. And then it closes the final section, and indeed the whole of the Psalm, in verse 12. Now this morning, our concern is with the second occurrence of the word, and particularly the manner in which it identifies those who are blessed or happy.

If you're interested in being blessed or happy, then you might want to listen carefully. The psalmist declares that blessedness or happiness belongs to those, and we quote from the Psalm, who have set their heart on pilgrimage.

[5 : 01] Notice there in verse 5, Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. And it is this expression that I want to give some thought to, and what I say will revolve around this expression.

It's a very intriguing phrase or description of those who are blessed, those who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. I could pose the question to you.

Have you set your heart on pilgrimage? And I would imagine that you might have some difficulty in answering that question, at least immediately, because you'd be thinking, well, what does that mean?

And of course, we can't answer a question until we know what the question means. So what we need to do is to give some thought to what the expression means, and only then could we try and, in any significant or meaningful way, answer the question.

Is your heart set on a pilgrimage? So this morning, that's what we're going to try and do. We're going to try and discover what it means, this expression, and we're going to do so by considering what we might call the component parts of a pilgrimage.

[6 : 20] We want to know what the expression means. To have your heart set on pilgrimage, Well, what are the component parts of a pilgrimage, particularly as they're described or alluded to in the passage?

And we'll do so, we'll consider these component parts in reverse order, in terms of the reverse order in which they would occur in a pilgrimage. So we're going to begin with the destination.

A pilgrimage, for it to be a pilgrimage, requires a destination. So what's the destination? But then we're going to take a step back and consider the journey. What do we learn concerning the journey that would take us to our destination?

And then we'll take another step back and consider the decision, a decision that needs to be taken to even embark on the journey that will, in due course, lead us to our destination.

So these are, I think, three component parts of a pilgrimage. A decision to participate in the pilgrimage, the journey itself, and the destination. But as I say, we're going to look at these in reverse order.

[7 : 29] So let's begin with the destination. In verse 7, we're given an answer to that question, certainly from the perspective of the psalmist.

We're told that these men and women who set their heart on pilgrimage, they go from strength to strength till each appears before God in Zion.

For the psalmist, the destination that he has in mind is clear. It's Zion or Jerusalem. But as we noticed last week, what made Jerusalem so special was the one who was to be found there.

And that also is apparent in the language that we find there in verse 7 because it's not simply arriving in Zion. It's the fact that on doing so, the pilgrim appears before God.

Each appears before God in Zion. Again, the appeal is not simply to be there, but to worship God there.

[8 : 37] The purpose of the pilgrimage was not simply to arrive at a given destination, but to worship God. The purpose was to serve God and to enjoy His presence.

Well, that's certainly what the psalmist would have in mind when he was considering the destination of the pilgrimage that he is speaking of here in this psalm.

But how do we translate this into our current reality? What is our destination? It would be easy to quickly jump to the conclusion that for us as Christians, the destination of our pilgrimage is heaven. There we will worship and serve God and enjoy His presence eternally. And that is true. And that is something that we do well to look forward to, that time when we will indeed be in the presence of unhindered fellowship and enjoyment with God.

There we will serve and worship God and enjoy His presence eternally. If we think of Christian and pilgrim's progress, our destination is indeed at one level and in one very real sense, the celestial city.

[10 : 04] But our destination is not only one that we look forward to reaching in the future. We can arrive at our destination in the here and now.

You see, we arrive at our destination as we know, worship, and serve God in the present. We become what God intends us to be as we glorify and enjoy God today. and throughout our lives, while at the same time, continuing our journey to our ultimate destination of unhindered and perfect service and fellowship with God.

Have you arrived at this destination? Do you, day by day, offer your life to God as an act of worship?

Do you, day by day, seek and enjoy God's presence and friendship in your life? The psalmist assures us that they are blessed or happy who have set their heart on pilgrimage and who, crucially, know what it is to reach the destination.

[11 : 23] If you're unsure as to whether that is true of you, you might ask the question, and it would be a very wise question to ask, well, how can I get there?

How can I arrive at this destination that you speak of? One feature of the pilgrim's way to Jerusalem that the psalmist has in mind as he pens this psalm is that it was a way well-traveled.

The pilgrims who made their way to Jerusalem for the different festivals, they knew the way. It was a way that was well-trodden by God's people. There was no novelty to it.

There was no uncertainty as to the route to be taken. It was a way well-trodden. And when we think of ourselves and our need to arrive at this destination of friendship with God and the worship of God, it is also a way well-trodden.

It is a way that is mapped out for us in the Bible, in the Gospel. Jesus sums it up neatly and powerfully in the words that he spoke of himself, I am the way.

[12 : 32] He is the way that leads us to this destination of friendship with God and fellowship with God and worship of God as we go through Jesus, trusting in him as our Savior.

So this pilgrimage involves a destination, but the pilgrimage, as we continue, as I said at the beginning, going in reverse order, the pilgrimage also involves a journey.

For the psalmist, and we try and place ourselves in his shoes just to begin with, for the psalmist and his fellow pilgrims, the journey to Jerusalem required strength and stamina.

In reference to that, we find in verse 5, blessed are those whose strength is in you who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. And clearly this reference to strength, this need for strength, is related to the pilgrimage.

In order to arrive at the destination, in order to participate in the pilgrimage, strength was needed. The pilgrims needed to be strong in order to participate.

[13 : 43] So strength and stamina were required, but also endurance was required through the tough, the difficult parts of the journey. Verse 6 speaks of such a part of the journey.

As they, the pilgrims, pass through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs. This valley of Baca was an arid valley. The exact location is difficult to be clear on, but clearly the reference is to a difficult part, a difficult stretch on the journey to Jerusalem.

And the pilgrims needed endurance to get through that valley, through the other side, and so in due course arrive in Jerusalem. So strength and stamina were required, endurance was required.

Another feature of the journey that was necessary and helped the pilgrims arrive was the company of others. A pilgrimage necessarily involved others who accompanied one on the way to Jerusalem. But then one other aspect of this journey that the psalm speaks of or certainly alludes to is that the journey could only be safely made if the nation enjoyed peace and security within its borders.

[15 : 08] If the nation was at war, be it civil or attacked by those from the outside, then any such pilgrimage that the psalmist so wishes to participate in would have been so much more difficult to conduct.

And the peace that was needed in order that there could be a pilgrimage could be provided only by a righteous king. And it is for that righteous king that the pilgrims pray in verse 9.

Look upon our shield, O God. Look with favor on your anointed one. The king who would grant to the nation the peace and security that it would allow the worshipers to participate in the pilgrimage and arrive at their destination.

Well, these are some of the thoughts that are in the mind of the psalmist as he contemplates the pilgrimage that he so wishes to be part of. But again, how can we translate these realities in that very particular historical context that was true for the psalmist to ourselves in different times?

Well, in many ways, the elements that we've identified are not so different for us. that they remain for us as believers. We too need strength for the journey.

[16:32] Blessed are those whose strength is in you. Serving God in this world is not a walk in the park. We need strength.

Sometimes we need strength and stamina just to carry on walking, to carry on worshipping God, to carry on serving God.

We sometimes feel that those strengths wane. And we need strength. We need stamina to carry on. And where does that strength come from that enables us to carry on?

We hear a lot in these days about inner strength and about strength from within ourselves. But the psalmist knows that if we only look within, we will be disappointed.

We need to look to another for our strength. As the psalmist makes so clear in the language he employs, our strength is in you. Blessed are those whose strength is in you.

[17:38] The strength that we need, the stamina that we require, it's strength that we find in God, and it comes from God. So we need strength for the journey.

You need strength for the journey. But then also, we can draw the parallel with what the picture that the psalmist paints as we would recognize that we need endurance in the face of pain and suffering.

This valley of Baca that is spoken of there in verse 6, it is, as far as I can discover, an unidentified valley on the route to Jerusalem.

Now, on what route? Well, it would depend where the journey had begun. The pilgrims would have gathered and congregated in Jerusalem from all over Israel. So what particular route is in mind, we don't know.

And so we can identify geographically that the valley that is being spoken of. But what we can say about it, what is clear about this valley, is that it was a dry and arid place on the way to Jerusalem.

[18:49] And the pilgrims, for whom that was the route that they had to take, if they were to arrive at their destination, they needed to pass through this valley. It was unavoidable.

I'm sure those who were reading this psalm when it was first composed, that they would have been able to identify the place and it would have rung true with them. Ah, yes, that is such a difficult stretch of the journey, going through that dry and arid valley.

But they had to. If they were to arrive, they had to go through it. It was a real place and it presented real challenges.

Four pilgrims heading to Jerusalem. But I think the psalmist, as he makes reference to it, even he is thinking of it beyond the aspect of the physical difficulties of a real geographic physical valley.

Even he, as he writes, recognizes that this speaks beyond a physical reality. And certainly for us, it does. It serves as a picture of the real experience of Christians in every age.

[20:00] We too must unavoidably pass through valleys that are dark and dry and desolate. That is part of the regular Christian experience.

It ought not to surprise us. It's difficult and it can be so hard for us to accept, but it is, as our reality, unavoidable.

There are no detours that guarantee an easy ride for us as we would seek to know and to serve and to worship God.

But notice the experience of the pilgrims in this arid valley. It seems to me that two things are said of them. First of all, we're told that the pilgrims make it a place of springs.

That in verse 6, as they pass through the valley of Baca, they, the pilgrims, make it a place of springs. So that's the first thing that is said of them. But it also is said of them that they experience the refreshment of autumn rains.

[21:12] That's what the psalmist immediately goes on to say there in verse 6. The autumn rains also cover it with pools, cover this dry and arid valley.

And at the risk of stretching our text beyond what would be legitimate, I think we can identify, in the pictures painted here, both a responsibility for the believer and the gracious refreshment provided by God to the believer in the midst of suffering.

We think, first of all, of our responsibility. The pilgrims here, we're told, they don't find a place of springs. The valley isn't a place of springs. But we're told that they make it a place of springs.

This was their responsibility. Now, what that involved is very difficult to imagine. But as we think of our circumstances and our dark valleys, in those times, we have a responsibility as Christians to fight through.

We can't simply sit back and wait for God to sort it out for us. We have a responsibility to fight through this valley.

[22 : 28] We have to sweat and toil as we maybe struggle with Scripture, as we maybe battle in prayer. We sometimes have to drag ourselves to even join with others in public worship.

It's no longer a delight. It's no longer that what we want to do above all else. It's a burden for us to do it. But we have to do it. We can't give up and say, well, we're not going to go anymore. We're not going to join with God's people anymore. Now, we have to make that dry and arid valley a place of springs for us. Sometimes we have to make a very painful effort to just get along with one another.

But that is something that we need to do. We can't just sit back and hope that God will do everything for us. The pilgrims make this valley a place of springs.

But also we're told that as they go through this valley, they enjoy the autumn rains that cover it with pools. I think that speaks of how God does in the midst of these dark times for us as they are, and if they are, are experienced.

[23 : 44] And if they're not now, then they will be in due course, be assured. That in those times, God does show us tokens of His grace. He provides us moments of refreshment and encouragement so that even in the darkness, even in the arid valley that we're in, we can still enjoy and savor God's goodness and grace towards us that helps us through the valley.

The pilgrims needed strength to make it to their destination. They needed endurance in the face of suffering and difficulty. But the pilgrims needed, and we also need, the company of God's people on the journey.

The pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a community affair. A solitary pilgrim was a contradiction in terms. And I wonder if the reference to the pilgrims going from strength to strength.

There in verse 7, they go from strength to strength till each appears before God in Zion. I wonder if that reference is not a description of the strength and energy that is generated as the pilgrims mutually encourage and spur on one another.

You can imagine the scene. They're tired. The journey has been long and weedishome. Their strengths are coming to an end, but they're near their destination. You can just imagine the conversation as one who maybe has a little bit more strength than another says, Come on, you can do it.

[25 : 18] We're nearly there. Just a little more and we'll be there. You can see Jerusalem. Don't give up now. Together we can do it. I'll help you. You know, I'll come alongside you.

And they go from strength to strength as together they make their way through the valley of Baca, through the long and arduous journey. They needed the company of others and we need the company of others as we would make our journey to arrive at our destination.

We hear football supporters assuring their favorite team that they'll never walk alone. Well, God tells us, His people, you can't walk alone.

You can't do it. You won't arrive. You'll stumble on the way if you're alone. We need the company and the help and the encouragement of others. But then the final aspect of the journey that we've drawn out from these verses is that we need the protection of a righteous king.

Then in verse 8, the psalmist asks God to hear his prayer. Hear my prayer, O Lord God Almighty. Listen to me, O God of Jacob. But what is his prayer?

[26 : 42] He's asking God to hear his prayer. He's asking God to listen to his prayer. But what is his prayer? Thus far in the psalm, there's nothing really that we could identify as a prayer. But what immediately follows certainly is a prayer.

And so it seems reasonable to conclude that the prayer that he's speaking of is the prayer that follows. There in verse 9, Look upon our shield, O God. Look with favor on your anointed one. Now this was a prayer, a communal prayer of God's people on behalf of the king. The king was the people's shield or protector.

Look upon our shield, O God. Here they're not speaking of God as their shield, though as we'll see in a moment, God is also described in that way. But here they're speaking of, and they're praying on behalf of, the king who was appointed by God as their shield or protector.

The king was the one, to use the language also of the psalmist, anointed, anointed by God's appointment to represent and model God before the people.

[27 : 55] And this job of modeling God, that's emphasized, or at least we're given reason to use that language when we see how the same word shield in the psalm is used to describe both the king and God.

Here in verse 9, is speaking of the king. Look upon our shield, O God. Look upon our king, the one that you have appointed over us. But then at the end of the psalm, or towards the end of the psalm, in verse 11, we read, For the Lord God is a sun and shield.

So the very same word, used to speak of the king and to use to speak of God. And what that illustrates is, at least in part, the role of the king to model God before the people, to represent God before the people.

The pilgrims pray on behalf of their king because they know that their welfare is bound up with the favor shown by God towards their king. But when we think of ourselves as Christians today, we too need a righteous king to deliver and protect us.

And the king we need and the king we have is not just like God, he is God. The Hebrew word translated, anointed, there in verse 9, is Masiah.

[29 : 20] That's the Hebrew word that's translated there. And I mention it simply because we can readily identify what word is derived from that, the word Messiah.

Here they are praying on behalf of their Messiah. And our king is the Messiah king. Our king is King Jesus, the one all the previous kings pointed forward to.

King Jesus is our deliverer and protector. He delivers us from our sin and guilt and he protects us from ourselves and from our enemies.

And so on this journey that allows us to arrive at our destination, not only in the future, but in the here and now, there are these elements that we can draw from the experience of the psalmist as he considered a physical pilgrimage, though no doubt he also had in mind a pilgrimage that went beyond the merely physical.

But having thought about these aspects of the journey, let's go one step further back and consider the decision. You see, there's a destination, there's a journey, but it all begins with a decision.

[30 : 38] Let's go back to the phrase where we began in verse 5. Blessed are those whose strength is in you who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.

There is no pilgrimage. There is no arriving at the destination for those who fail to set their heart on pilgrimage. And this is language that speaks of resolve.

It is language that speaks of conscious decision. And this is resolve and decision that is needed to both begin the journey and to continue on the journey.

Let's start at the very beginning and ask the question, have you begun the journey? Have you set your heart on pilgrimage? There is a decision involved.

You need to set your heart on this. You need to determine that this is what your life is all about.

That this is what is most needful for you to set your heart on pilgrimage.

[31 : 45] To have as your greatest need and desire fellowship with God and the worship of God. Blessedness or happiness is the experience of those who set their heart on pilgrimage.

You need to decide to worship and serve God. You need to embark on the well-worn and only path that allows you to worship and serve God.

Trusting in Messiah Jesus as your Lord and Savior. So many have not set their heart on pilgrimage because their hearts are set on other things.

There is something else that takes the center stage in your life. Something else that consumes your affection. Something else that does not allow you to set your heart on pilgrimage because you see you can't set your heart in a multiplicity of directions.

You have to set it on one thing and on one thing alone. And what the Bible tells us is that if you want to be blessed, if you want to know deep and lasting happiness, you have to set your heart on pilgrimage, on knowing and worshiping and serving a God.

[33 : 02] The well-worn and set-out path for us to take that decision and to begin that journey is by trusting in Jesus, Messiah Jesus, as our Lord and Savior.

But we can't only think of this resolve as being something that's required at the very beginning. Are you conscious of the need to maintain that resolve as you continue on the journey?

You see, as Christians, as believers, we need to be constantly resetting our hearts on pilgrimage. We need to be permanently refocusing our attentions and affections upon Jesus.

We need to maintain our resolve. In truth, we have no other option nor would we wish for any other option. Where would we go if we were to free ourselves from the grip of God's grace?

It's a horrendous prospect. But if we were to do that, where would you go? Peter put it eloquently many moons ago when Jesus asked him if he wished to follow others who were abandoning Jesus. [34 : 19] And how did Peter reply, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Peter says, if I were to go, where would I go?

I've nowhere else to go. I've set my heart on you and I have nowhere else to go, nowhere else I would want to go. And we need to be constantly refocusing our attention and resetting our affections on the one who has called us to himself.

The astonishing popularity of Pharrell Williams' little ditty reminds us of a constant inhuman experience and aspiration across generations and cultures.

We just want to be happy. And happiness or blessedness is what God has created us for. He has created you to be blessed, to be happy, and he has provided the way by which you can be happy. Blessed or happy are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. This is the truth of the matter and it is the truth when believed and embraced that brings us the happiness we so thirst for.

[35 : 52] Happiness is the truth? I don't think so. But it is the truth, truth embodied in the person and saving work of Jesus that brings happiness to the thirsty soul.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you and we pray that you would be the one who would be working in us and working in our hearts, enabling us and helping us to set our hearts on pilgrimage, to set our hearts on yourself, to set our affections on your son, Jesus, to fix our priorities and our life goals on the service of God and the worship of your holy name.

We acknowledge that if all of this is to take place, we stand in need of your help, of your spirit working in us and helping us and enabling us.

We pray that as your people, those who by your grace have been helped to see you and to help to fix our affections upon you, that you would help us to maintain our resolve in the face of discouragement, in the face of hardship, in the face of dry and desolate times, in our own personal experience or indeed beyond, that you would help us to remain firm and to keep our resolve and that as we do, so we would also know and experience and rejoice in the evidence of your gracious presence with us and your gracious purposes on our behalf.

And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.