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# The Secret to Happiness

## Psalm 84

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What is it that truly makes someone happy? Let me ask *you* that question, “What do you think would make you happy?”

If we were to go around with a microphone this morning and have different people respond to that question, we’d get a lot of different answers. But that’s really not what I’m looking for. I’m not asking intellectually what would your response be. But rather, every day of our lives we answer that question by what we live for—by how we live our lives. We are doing what we think will ultimately make us happy. That is what I’m really asking. Each day as we live our lives, what do we think will make us happy?

Some people think it’s money or material things, and that’s what they live for. That’s their passion—that’s what they give their lives to. Now, that can be someone who doesn’t have any money, but they’re convinced if they had money they’d be happy. Or it can be someone who has lots of money, but they reason if they just had a little bit more, then maybe they’d be happy. So they buy all kinds of material things.

Or maybe it’s success. Some people are looking for something down that track to make them happy. For others, it’s a relentless pursuit for pleasure, being convinced that somehow that’s going to lead to happiness.

For some of you teenagers here this morning, in your mind it has to do with popularity—it has to do with fitting in. You’re convinced that if you were popular, if you just fit in, that it would make you happy. And some teenagers are willing to do just about anything in order to fit in.

For some it’s a relationship. Some of you are convinced that if you had a different partner you’d be happy. Some of you who are single are convinced that if you had a partner, then you would be happy.

The psalmist understood what it is that makes us happy. He’s not writing about theory; he’s writing about what he has experienced and puts it into the words of the psalm. Psalm 84 is a psalm with beautiful imagery, and you really have to unpack the images to understand the psalm. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great British preacher, called Psalm 84 “one of the choicest psalms of the collection.”

Nobody really knows what the background of the psalm is. Most likely it has something to do with traveling to Zion, or to Jerusalem, to the temple during one of the yearly festivals in order to enter into the presence of God. You have to understand that in the Old Covenant the presence of God dwelt in the tabernacle, or the temple in the case of this psalm—specifically in the Holy of Holies. So they literally went to a geographical area to experience the presence of God. It appears that is really the background for the writing of this psalm.

I think this psalm is organized around three “blessed” statements. You see it in verses 4, 5 and 12: “Blessed is the man {or the person} who ... {and then it finishes that statement}.”

When we see that word *blessed*, it’s not the typical Hebrew word *barak* that means God blessing His people or a father blessing his children. This is a different word than that. This is a word that means to be happy, but it’s not a trivial, silly-type of happiness. It’s a happiness that is deep and rich and satisfying—a type of happiness that would be similar to what we would call “joy.” It’s something that’s really deep and meaningful, which ultimately fulfills and satisfies us. That’s really what this psalm is about, and the rest of the psalm wraps around these three statements.

The first “blessed statement” is in verse 4: “How blessed are those who dwell in Thy house!” It is talking about how blessed, or how happy, those are who dwell in God.

When we were studying Ephesians, we talked about this concept of *dwelling*. When the psalmist talks about dwelling in God’s house, you have to understand that this is a picture of God’s presence. As you read through the psalm, it’s obvious he’s not longing for a building; he’s longing for the very presence of God. He wants to be with God.

In our Ephesians study, we talked about the difference between a motel and our homes. A motel is a place where we visit—a place where we stop on the way through. But our home is where we dwell. It’s where we live and it’s where we make our life. That’s the meaning of this word *dwell*. It means to live with God and to make a life with Him. It goes far beyond just visiting God every now and then.

Let’s go back to verse 1 and see what he says about this: “How lovely {how beautiful} are Thy dwelling places, O LORD of hosts!” We’ve talked before about the title, or the name “LORD of hosts.” It means “the LORD Almighty,” or “the LORD of the heavens.” It carries the idea that He is the God of the hosts of heaven; He’s the God of the universe. The psalmist is saying that the God of the universe, the LORD over the armies of the heavens, chooses to dwell among us on earth. And what a beautiful place it is where He chooses to dwell.

So imagine this journey that they’ve made to Zion, to Jerusalem, to the temple in order to experience the presence of God. He’s imagining what a beautiful thing it is that this vast God of the universe would dwell among them that they could experience His presence.

Verse 2: “My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the LORD.” Those words could be translated “nearly fainted for longing for the courts of the LORD” ... in other words, to be in the presence of God. “My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.” I’m not sure the translation “sing” is quite correct here. This word is a word meaning “to cry out.” It was used to describe a battle cry when they would go into battle. Or it was used to describe a child who would cry out when he or she was hungry. So it’s not really the idea of singing this melodic song. It’s the idea of a cry that comes out of his soul, out of his heart—this longing to spend time in the presence of God.

Notice he says “my soul...my heart... my flesh.” He’s saying, “My entire person—all of me—longs to be in the presence of God.” This is very passionate language. As a matter of fact, it’s the language that would be used to describe how one lover longs to be in the

presence of his or her partner. It's not unusual for this language, this longing of one lover to another, to be used in the Bible to describe our relationship with God. It often uses the language of lovers, a husband and a wife, and speaks in terms of intimacy. That's what the Hebrew means here when it talks about a passionate longing to be in the presence of God, as a lover would long to be with his or her partner.

It would be my opinion that most Christians do not experience this kind of passion for God. We understand that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and we trust Jesus as our Savior. We know we're going to heaven. We come and we serve as best we can, and we try to live a good life. But deep down, there really isn't that passionate relationship with God—the passion that one lover would have for his or her partner.

But that's what this psalmist is talking about. He is saying that the ultimate secret to happiness is really that kind of a longing...that kind of a passion for God.

He looks up into the pillars of the temple, and he sees some birds there—a sparrow and a swallow—and he becomes envious of them. He becomes jealous of them, wishing he could have what they have. That's what he says in verse 3: “The bird *{which could probably be better translated “the sparrow”}* also has found a house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even Thine altars *{probably referring to the pillars}*, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.”

He looks up at the sparrows, who have made a home in the pillars of the temple. Now you have to remember that this is someone who has traveled a long, very difficult journey to enter into the presence of God. He is there with this passion, as one lover who has met his partner. But he knows that shortly he's going to have to go back home, and he's going to have to leave the presence of God. He looks at the sparrow and he says, “I wish I could be like the sparrow—because the sparrow lives here. The sparrow has made his home here in the pillars of the temple. I wish I could live here and never have to leave.”

Symbolically, the sparrow in the Bible usually refers to the least of God's creatures. That's how Jesus talked about the sparrow in the book of Matthew. He said that even if a sparrow (the least of God's creatures) falls to the ground, God knows that—so how much more will He take care of you. The psalmist is looking at the sparrow and saying, “You know, even the least of God's creatures get to just stay here...get to live here...get to dwell here. I wish I could be a sparrow.”

Then he looks at the swallows. In the Bible the swallows are often symbolic of restlessness. If you've ever seen a swallow, you understand that they just go all the time—they're a very restless bird. The only time they really come to a stop is when they build a nest and the female sits in the nest in order to lay her young. That's what he sees: The swallows have made their home in these pillars. They've made a nest and she is going to lay her young there. He looks at that and says, “I wish I could be like the swallow—this restless bird that has found a place of resting in the very presence of God. I wish I could be a swallow.”

So the psalmist uses a beautiful imagery to talk about the longing he has just to stay and dwell in the presence of God...and not have to leave, not have to go home.

What's interesting about that imagery is that the very thing that the psalmist *longed for* is the very thing that *we have* in the New Covenant through Jesus Christ. These people in the

Old Covenant literally had to travel this long, difficult journey to experience the presence of God. But because of Jesus' death on the cross and His provision of salvation, Jesus now dwells within us—no longer in a temple made by hands, but within our hearts.

We have the presence of God within us. He will never leave us nor forsake us. We have exactly what the psalmist longed for. As a matter of fact, we talked about this when we studied Ephesians 3:17. Paul said, "Let Jesus dwell in your hearts." It means to let Jesus come in and live there...let Him remodel...let Him refurbish. Let Him do whatever is necessary to create the proper environment that we might live with the presence of God in our lives.

Jesus said that's the very purpose of our salvation. John 17:3: "This is eternal life, that we may know Him." The phrase, "that we may know Him" is a term of intimacy. It means that we may be intimate with Him, and that we may know His presence constantly with us.

We take for granted this amazing truth that God dwells within us if we've trusted Jesus as Savior. When a couple comes for premarital counseling, there are some things we don't have to even talk about. If I'm meeting with a couple whose wedding is just a month away, I've never had to sit down with that couple and say, "You know, I've been thinking we need to work on some things in order to make this marriage work. One of the things I want you to do every day is to try as hard as you can to think about your partner. Just maybe make a note to try and think about your partner each day. And if you can work it out, every now and then, spend a little time together."

I've never had to have that discussion, because that's all they do. They think about each other when they get up in the morning...all day long...when they go to bed at night. And they'll do whatever they need to do to rearrange their schedule in order to spend time together. They are passionate for one another, and they're longing for that time when they will be married and dwell together as husband and wife.

That's the passion that the psalmist has for God. He is saying, "That's really what I want. I have this passion for God. I just want to be with Him. I want to be in His presence. I just want to experience the presence of God—because I know that's ultimately what makes me happy. Happy is the person who dwells in God."

The second thing he says is in verse five, "How blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee"—or how happy is the person whose strength or whose confidence is in God. This isn't talking about physical strength. This is talking about confidence. This is talking about a willingness to put our confidence in God and to trust Him.

Then in the last part of verse five he says, "In whose heart are the highways to Zion!" That's beautiful imagery, because for them "the highway to Zion" was a literal highway. They actually had to travel miles and miles down this road in order to finally get to Jerusalem, to be able to enter into the presence of God.

The psalmist also understood that, even though it was a literal highway, it still ultimately was a highway of their hearts. Because ultimately you could be as pagan as a stone and walk that highway. What really caused you to experience the presence of God was traveling down the highway of your heart.

He is saying that when we travel down this highway in our heart to enter the presence of God, it's a difficult journey. I'm sure he's thinking about the actual path that they had to travel, because there were stretches of that journey that were very, very difficult. In fact, they would have to think seriously about whether or not they were going to take that risk to travel those areas in order to get to Zion to experience the presence of God. He uses that as an imagery when he says, "You know, that's the way it is. Even in the highway of our heart there are valleys that we travel through."

Verse 6: "Passing through the valley of Baca, they make it a spring, the early rain also covers it with blessings." Now nobody knows quite what the "valley of Baca" was, but it could mean the "valley of weeping." That's the development of the word, so that may be what it was. It may have been a very difficult valley that they literally traveled through en route to Jerusalem, and because it was so difficult, that may have been the reason it was called the valley of weeping. Another option is the "valley of balsam," referring to balsam trees. That would be the same basic image, because balsam trees grew in very dry, barren, difficult terrain. It would be the same idea: This valley where these trees grew was that valley that was so difficult to pass through. It was a valley of weeping.

But he says that because their strength and their confidence is in God, they turn it into a spring. Now notice it doesn't say *God* turns it into a spring; it says *they* turn it into a spring. He is saying that because they have put their confidence in God, God turns that place of weeping into a place of growth—into a place where there's a spring. And they experience growth in the presence of God along the journey—so much so, that God responds by bringing the "early rain"—God's blessing.

We don't really understand this concept of an early rain, because we don't have a dry season and a rainy season. But in countries where they have a very distinct dry season and rainy season, it would be very unusual to have any rain at all during the dry season. So they're traveling through this valley of weeping in this very dry and barren stretch. In the midst of that, because they put their confidence in God, it turns to a spring and God brings His blessing—this early rain... this unexpected rain. God meets them there.

In verse 7 it says, "They go from strength to strength." It's a phrase that would have been used to describe a valiant warrior going from battle to battle. It's the idea of victory after victory. As God meets them there in the valley of weeping and brings these blessings, He strengthens them, and they go from these moments-to-moments on this journey into the presence of God.

Then there's a beautiful statement at the end of verse 7: "Every one of them appears before God in Zion." Remember, that's the destination—that's the goal. They are seeking the presence of God. The psalmist is saying that even though they go through some very difficult times, even in this highway in their heart, they do have to go through the valley of weeping. But because they trust in God and He is their strength, He will meet them there and make sure that every one of them gets to Zion. In other words, none of them will die along the road. None of them will die short of the goal.

Do you know what that means? That means there is nothing that stands between you and happiness. Nothing! Because if you're willing to pursue it the way the psalmist talks about it, even in those valleys of weeping, God will meet you there if you trust Him as your

strength and your confidence. And He will get you to the destination. He will get you into His presence where you experience this happiness...this fulfillment...this satisfaction.

I know it's easy to say, "Well, I could be happy if I had a different partner...or I could be happy if this...or I could be happy if that." The psalmist isn't buying that. The psalmist says, "You know, if you're going to define the way to happiness God's way, it's available to everybody—regardless of your circumstances." You say, "Well, you don't know, but I have this disease." God will get you there! God will get you there even through the valley of weeping. If you're willing to put your confidence in Him, regardless of your circumstances, you can, today, experience this kind of happiness that is only found in God.

The third statement is in verse 12: "O LORD of hosts, how blessed *{or how happy}* is the man *{person}* who trusts in Thee!" Now these statements are kind of working their way in backward order, it seems to me, because ultimately you trust God...therefore you put your confidence in God...therefore you seek and celebrate His presence.

One of the obvious manifestations of trust in God is our prayer life. And that's exactly where he goes in verse 8: "O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Behold our shield, O God, and look upon the face of Thine anointed."

When he talks about "Thine anointed," he's talking about the king. The king was God's anointed, and the king's role was to be a shield. His role was to be a protector, a defense, a shield for them so that they could make this very difficult journey in relative safety into the presence of God. But the king was always symbolic of the Anointed—Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, who would become our shield, our defense, our protector, the One who would make it possible for us to enter into the presence of God.

That's exactly what he says in verse 10: "For a day in Thy courts is better than a thousand outside. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God, than dwell in the tents of wickedness."

When he talks about those "outside" *{those elsewhere}* or he talks about the "tents of wickedness" he's talking about the same thing. He's not talking about tents filled with thieves and murderers. We would all say, "Oh no, we don't hang out in places like that." But that's not what he's talking about. He's talking about any pursuit of happiness outside of God. Those are the tents that he's talking about, and that's what he means by elsewhere.

Do you believe what the psalmist says is true? You know, we sang these words earlier in our service: "Better is one day in Your court, than a thousand elsewhere." They're very easy words to sing. But I often find it ironic that we sing these words, and by Monday morning we're headed right back to the tents of the wicked. It's because we really don't believe it's true. We don't really believe that one hour at the threshold of God's presence would bring us more happiness than a thousand...or than trying anything else that this world has to offer. We don't really believe that, and that's why we pursue the things we do.

The psalmist says all it would take is one hour. One hour at the threshold of God's presence—and you could never again settle for anything else this world has to offer.

Verse 11: "For the LORD God is a sun and shield." That's an interesting statement. This is the only place in the Bible where God is ever called a "sun." The reason is probably

because all the pagan religions worshiped a sun god. So the writers of Scripture were very careful to stay away from that. But in this particular psalm, when he refers to God as a “sun,” he’s talking about the glory of God. As you cannot stare into the sun, you cannot even really stare into the glory of God. It’s too glorious.

He says God is also a shield, and we’ve already talked about that. Jesus Christ is our shield that protects us. He is our defense that allows us to enter into God’s presence and experience His glory. It’s both God’s grace and glory, and that’s exactly what he says: “The LORD gives grace and glory.” So because of that, “No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly.” No good thing—nothing we need for our happiness—will He withhold for those who trust Him...for those who walk in integrity...for those who walk uprightly before Him.

He then closes it in verse 12 by again saying, “O LORD of hosts, how blessed is the man who trusts in Thee!”

Do you believe the psalmist is right? Do you believe what he is saying is true? Do you believe that one day in God’s presence could bring you more happiness than a thousand days anywhere else? Do you believe that there’s a happiness found when we dwell in the presence of God that’s beyond anything that this world has to offer?

Let’s think of it this way. What if we had a videotape of your last 30 days—everything you did in public and in private, and every thought that went through your head. What if we played it on the screen up here. It would not be hard to determine what you think will make you happy. It would be very, very obvious.

My question is this: Does it line up with what the psalmist said? Would it line up with someone who has this undying passion to be with God? That’s ultimately where we’re going to find happiness.

We may need to make some changes. We may need to make some realignments. I would encourage you tomorrow morning not to run back to the tents of the wicked, but to believe the psalmist when he says, “One day in God’s presence will be better than anything you can experience in this life.” That is the secret to happiness!