

Psalm 84

Have you ever gone shopping to lift your mood? What was the last thing you bought to make yourself feel better or to celebrate something in your life? Well, if you have been shopping as a stress reliever, you are not alone. In a nationwide 2023 survey asking women about their purchasing habits, something like 60% of Japanese women surveyed said that went shopping as a way to relax (チル消費).¹ We are safe to assume that the other 40% of survey participants chose other options above “retail therapy” or チル消費 because everyone feels better getting a little treat every now and then.

What do you think about this kind of retail therapy? At the heart of retail therapy is the idea that both in the shopping and purchasing things, people experience an emotional lift by getting what they want. This of course cuts across all age, gender, and socioeconomic lines. Most people, whether they like shopping or not, enjoy the mood lift of getting stuff. What do you think is at the heart of this? Why go shopping to lift your mood? What emotional need is shopping meeting? Practically speaking, if you are feeling overwhelmed by stress the last thing you probably need to do is go out and spend money. In an American survey, of the 63% of Americans who said that they were influenced by their emotions to make a purchase—something like 74% of them regretted making the purchase. In other words, shopping to feel better is not meeting the emotional need that prompted the shopping excursion. Retail therapy is simply a way to numb the feelings of stress or to take one’s mind off their problems for a little while. On the one hand, it can be healthy to take one’s mind off a problem to then go back to it later with a fresh perspective. However, it appears that lots of people ultimately find shopping has left them with regret not a fresh perspective with which to tackle life’s problems.

Let’s ask all this another way, when was the last time you got on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, a news website, Netflix, etc. because you were trying to destress. How did you feel afterwards? Ironically, most people do not feel better after scrolling on Facebook or binging a bunch of videos on YouTube. I can’t speak for you all, but when I have done this, I add a feeling of guilt for wasting time to whatever was already bothering me.

The process of distracting myself from the internal angst that I feel is not the way to feel better. In order to make the most out of my life, I would need to slow down and think about what is going on and address the longings I have for meaning and satisfaction in life. The search of meaning and satisfaction in life almost certainly leads me to ask the “big questions” of who am I, why am I here, and what is my purpose in life. These big questions about the meaning of life ought to lead me to see that life has a deeper meaning than getting a lot of things and

¹ https://www.soumunomori.com/pressrelease/detail/pr-117799/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

getting the attention of the people around me. The search for meaning in life should draw my attention off myself and toward God.

We can see that the Psalmist is working with some of these same ideas in Psalm 84. The Psalmist is willing to trade all earthly success, power, and pleasure to be a doorkeeper in God's house. The main idea of Psalm 84 is simple: the Psalmist envisioned living in the presence of God as the highest good in life. In a moment of Holy Spirit inspired wisdom, Psalm 84 recalls one of the deepest needs of mankind—to be restored to living in the presence of God. The Psalmist's heart is aching for a restored Garden of Eden where he can dwell with God forever. The interesting thing about Psalm 84 is that if we look closely at it, we can see signs of the Lord Jesus as well as the role that he plays in bringing us into the presence of God. As we, like the Psalmist, ache to have the deepest longings of our hearts fulfilled, we also need to, like the Psalmist, find the answer to our aching hearts in the same place. We must find our identity in Christ, so that we can truly seek the highest good in life.

In Psalm 84, the Psalmist is dreaming of a new place to live. He wants to dwell with God. He is yearning for this with his entire being. The Psalmist has seen the beauty of Solomon's temple and wants to go and live there. Perhaps we have a hard time imagining the soul-aching beauty of the temple of Solomon. Most modern buildings are not beautiful and do not inspire feelings of transcendence, but if you have ever seen pictures of massive gothic cathedrals or better yet been inside one—you can imagine how the Psalmist felt looking at the temple. He calls the dwelling place of the Lord lovely and that anyone who finds themselves dwelling there to be blessed beyond measure. That in the dwellings of God, even the doorkeepers are given grace, honor, and no good thing will be withheld from them. Hidden in this passion for the temple is a desire to draw close to God. You can see this in verse 2, where he says my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God. In other words, the temple is beautiful only insofar as it has a connection with the living God. The emphasis here is on the blessedness of the presence of God.

We can see this in the imagery of the sparrow and the swallow building nests in the altar. Birds have the ultimate form of freedom. They can fly themselves anywhere they want to go. Yet the birds build nests and go back to them every day because the nests are the safety and security they need to live. The freedom to go anywhere and to be the master of one's own destiny is not the highest good that a person can pursue—even the birds know better than that. In other words, being powerful and getting what you want all the time are nothing compared to dwelling in the presence of God. The ones that have the good life—the blessed life—are the ones that dwell in the house of the Lord and sing his praises all the time. At this point of the Psalm, the vision of dwelling with the Lord and being blessed by it is so beautiful and strong that most people would jump at the chance to be like the sparrow and build a home in the altar. The Psalmist has painted a picture of single-minded devotion to and joy in dwelling with the Lord. However, as is often the case, there is a problem. No matter how amazing, no matter how beautiful, no matter how joyous dwelling with the Lord and rejoicing in him are, we do not

want that all the time. In our best moments, we find joy and meaning in worship, but the thought of yearning for it all the time is for most of us a mere poetic device.

We have to keep in mind the framing of this Psalm as a vision of the highest good in life. We were in fact made to dwell with God like Psalm 84 describes. The fact that we do not want it most of the time shows how far we have truly fallen. As Christians, who do want to be restored to a right relationship with God, we at least know that we should want to dwell with God forever, but like many in our anxious world, we do not always want the presence of God. Sometimes all we want is a meal where we do not have to clear up afterwards or a new outfit or something related to one of our hobbies. The highest good in life is dwelling with God, but even the Psalmist knows that we do not get to enjoy that completely right now. The vision of the Psalmist shifts from standing in front of the temple and desiring to go in to dwell with God to that of a pilgrim on his way to the temple. Those on the way to the temple must pass through the “valley of misery” (v. 6). In many English translations, you will see something like the “Valley of Baca” instead of the valley of misery. There is a play on words here. There are several Hebrew letters that make very little sound when they are at the end of a word. The Hebrew word “Baca” ending in “aleph” means balsam, but the Hebrew word “Baca” ending in “he” means weeping or bitterness. There are a few places in the OT that this could literally be referring to, but the point of Psalmist is clear from verses 5 and 7. Even though we are not dwelling in the presence of God yet, our hearts can be so set on being there, that our journey through the long road of life, misery filled though it may be, will be marked by strength.

Yet again, we are met with a problem. Do you feel that your life is like what the Psalmist says in verse 7—that you go from strength to strength? I do not know about you, but I rarely feel like I have things headed in the right direction much less going from strength to strength. The single-minded devotion to the Lord that the Psalmist imagines as the pilgrim’s mindset as he journeys to Jerusalem and the temple is not something I can relate to, much like I could not relate to feeling this overwhelming desire to enter God’s presence all the time. We could chalk this Psalm up to the songwriter’s or poet’s overstated and expressive way of saying something simple like he wants to go and worship God in the temple. He is certainly saying that at the very least, but the ardor of his language is not meant as a figurative expression of fleeting desires like we have. We cannot accept that as the interpretation of Psalm 84 because that is not the way the Lord Jesus felt about it at 11 years old. In Luke 2:41-52, Jesus stayed behind in the temple to be in his Father’s house. Later, when Jesus saw the moneychangers and others making a mockery of the temple courtyard, he drove them out with a whip that he had woven himself. Jesus’ heart burned with the kind of ardor that Psalm 84 expresses about the presence of God. Yet even more striking is the turn that verse 8-9 take. The Psalmist pauses and commands God to look at his Anointed one. This is a reference to an anointed king, but we cannot help but see that as a reference to the Messiah—the Anointed one.

Once we see that the focus of the Psalm is on the Anointed of God, we can go back and reread the psalm with him in mind. The Lord Jesus lived with passion for the presence of God

that our doomscrolling and retail therapy failed to consider. He knew the glory of God firsthand and not only desired it, but as he went through the valley of misery—his own march toward Jerusalem—he went from strength to strength. Even in his weakness of body, he held the ways of God in his heart. The Lord Jesus better than anyone else could have believed that one day in the presence of God was better than 1000 somewhere else. When the Lord was tempted by Satan and taken up to a high mountain, he was given the opportunity to rule the world in the same fashion that Satan had, but Jesus refused on the grounds that the only one who could be worshipped was God. No one could have known better how great the Father was than the Son, and he was saying that he would rather be a doorkeeper in God's house than dwell outside the presence of God. In refusing to worship Satan, Jesus did not lose the kingdoms that Satan was offering him. He is trusting in his Father and the living in the blessedness that that trust brings with it.

The Lord Jesus found his strength in the presence of God, but what about us? I cannot speak for everyone, but I know that I do not measure up either in terms of longing for God's presence or refusing to dwell in the tents of ungodliness like it mentions in verse 11. If it comes down to me, I am going to come up short. Thanks be to God that it does not come down to us because in Jesus we can have a new identity, which is securely founded on and in him. The New Covenant reality that Jeremiah 31 talks about—having the Law of God written on our hearts and dwelling with God—is fulfilled in Jesus.

Jesus calls us to lean on him for strength. He calls us to receive him by faith and be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. When we have entered into his life, he holds us in the palm of his nail-scarred hand more securely than the grave had held us before he walked out of his. Through Jesus, we will sing the praises of God forever, and through him, we will learn to love the presence of God instead of fearing and shrinking back from him. He will be the one who gives us the patient endurance to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and to use it for a well, and in the end through him, we will see God face-to-face. I do not know how you came to church today: maybe you have found this new year to be full of joy and peace or maybe it has already been full of the same headaches and heartaches of last year. Either way, do not flee from the presence of God because in the presence of God is the fullness of joy and strength to meet each new day. You do not enter in because you want it enough or are good enough—he makes us what he wants us to be. Simply come today and every day to Jesus. Ask him to carry you all the way home. Draw near to him through his Word and prayer.

Almighty God, you are faithful to your people. Draw us near to you today through your blessed Son, our Lord, Jesus. Teach us to love your presence and draw near as little children. In Jesus' name, **Amen.**