

## LIVING THAT REFRESHES

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Psalm 84

### INTRODUCTION

When facing hardship, people respond quite differently. The Bridger Wilderness Area in Wyoming is in the midst of the rugged Rocky Mountains. Of course, wilderness means no roads or vehicles— just trails to hike. Registration sheets and comment cards were provided at trail heads. The Forest Service staff compiled some of the comments from just one summer:

- “Trails need to be reconstructed. Please avoid building trails that go uphill.”
- “Too many rocks in the mountains.”
- “The places where the trails do not exist are not well marked.”
- Then, some spoke of critter problems:
- “A small deer came into my camp and stole my jar of pickles. Is there a way I can get reimbursed?”
- “Too many bugs... and spiders and spider webs. Please spray the wilderness to rid the area of these pests.”
- This one was rather nice: “Trails need to be wider so people can walk holding hands.”

But, some don't complain when life's trail gets steep and the going gets tough. They inspire us and refresh us with their spirit and attitude. A few years ago, I read about Wendy Stoker. Wendy was born without arms. In high school, she placed third in the state of Iowa's girl's diving championships. She went to the University of Florida and worked even harder to gain the number two diving spot on the varsity diving team. At the same time, she carried a full academic load and found time for bowling and waterskiing. Also, it was noted that Wendy types 45 words a minute with her toes! Think about her the next time you feel like giving up or throwing a pity-party.

There are people who, everywhere they go, seem to bring joy and gladness. You see them coming or hear their voice on the phone and your heart gives a little jump for joy. In fact it seems, the tougher things get, the better they are. They seem to bring incredible fruitfulness out of the most desert-like conditions. We see the grace and energy of Christ in them in their adversities. I call these “refreshing people.” We like to be around such people because their spirit is contagious in a good way. As we're with them, we hope to catch a bit of what they have inside, learn of the resources they draw from, and the perspective that controls their outlook.

This morning, we're going to look at the witness of a person who seems to understand what it takes to be a refreshing person. We don't know the person's name, but he or she wrote the 84<sup>th</sup> Psalm and it is filled with insight into how we can become people who are refreshed and refreshing to others. I want to begin with what I see as the central affirmation in this Psalm, vs.

5-7.

- 5     *Blessed are those whose strength is in you,  
          who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.*
- 6     *As they pass through the Valley of Baca,  
          they make it a place of springs;  
          the autumn rains also cover it with pools.*
- 7     *They go from strength to strength,  
          till each appears before God in Zion.*

### **SPRINGS IN DESERTS**

The geographic place of the Valley of Baca is unknown. In fact, it may be a figurative expression. *Baca* refers to balsam trees which grow in very arid places. So, “the Valley of Baca” could be translated, “the thirsty valley” as the New English Bible does— a desert place without water. But the Psalmist says,

*As they pass through the Valley of Baca,  
          they make it a place of springs...*

In other words, in a place that is normally barren, without refreshing water, they make into *a place of springs*. *Baca* can also mean “weeping.” So, the Psalmist may be referring to a place of deep sorrow or pain. But even then, refreshment is found.

There is one other “double meaning” word here— “pools” and “blessings” are the same in Hebrew, the language of the Psalms. The Hebrew language was written only using consonants—no vowels were written. Thus, one can read either “pools” or “blessings” here. And, it makes little difference, for pools are certainly blessings in desert places.

The Psalmist may well have intended these double meanings for “Baca” and “pools.” In our pilgrimage, we go through, desert places where spiritually we feel dry, lonely, and forsaken. Also, we pass through sorrowful, painful places that cause us to weep. But the Psalmist is affirming something wonderful: they can become a place of refreshment to us and others around us— places of amazing fruitfulness and blessing. The secret is expressed in vs. 5

*Blessed are those whose strength is in you,  
          who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.*

Here we see two principles: first, their strength is in God and second, their hearts are focused upon following God on pilgrimage. I like the way The Message paraphrases this:

*How blessed all those in whom you live,  
          whose lives become roads you travel.*

Let’s explore these two components of refreshing living further: strength in God and hearts on pilgrimage.

### **STRENGTH IN GOD**

How do we draw strength from God’s unlimited resources? It begins with spending time with God— time in His presence in worship and meditation. That’s how the Psalm begins. Let’s read vs. 1-4 together.

You can picture the author spending time in the temple in worship. In Old Testament times, the

presence of the Lord was mainly seen as being in the temple or tabernacle. Since Pentecost, that has changed for us. The Spirit of God actually dwells within the hearts of believers, so we can be in His presence anywhere, anytime. But here in the Psalm, we see the passion and desire to spend time in God's presence eloquently expressed in,

*My soul yearns, even faints,  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh cry out  
for the living God.*

While there, just enjoying being close to God, he looks up and sees a sparrow with her nest on one of the pillars of beams. Now, you could see that as a negative. Birds can create some undesirable messes in an open-air structure. But for this Psalmist, as he observes this part of God's creation, his Spirit-alert imagination leads him to think of having his dwelling near the Lord's altar. Everything is pointing him to God. Do you let God's creation to that for you?

I recall several years ago, when we lived in Ohio, we went to a concert with the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra at the Blossom Music Center near Akron. This is an outdoor facility where the orchestra performs during the summer months. Closest to the stage is a covered area with a roof about 70 ft. high, and then open on three sides so people can also sit on the grassy slopes. Polly and I paid enough to get a chair under the covered part. (Sudden downpours of rain can often happen in Ohio). There was a sparrow perched high in the rafters. As the orchestra began, it joined in with great energy. Before the concert, its chirps were normal sparrow chatter. Now, it was different. It was like he felt the orchestra was accompanying him and his song took on greater volume and power. (It think that was Polly's favorite part of the concert).

Getting into God's presence is often difficult when we are in the Valleys of Baca. Worship with God's people is a wonderful help. Let their faith and their songs carry you into His presence. Let the Word of God proclaimed focus you. When we can't be with the church in worship, a tape or CD of Christian music can help. Reading Scripture is another avenue into His presence. A meditative walk in God's marvelous creation can restore us—observing His handiwork can move our hearts to praise, bringing us into His presence. Other Christians can help us through their sharing. And good Christian books are another way we join in the fellowship of believers and can be renewed by God's Spirit. But remember, it is a choice: *Blessed are those whose strength is in you* (5).

Prayer is crucial for drawing strength from God. The last half of the Psalm is in the form of a prayer:

8 *Hear my prayer, O LORD God Almighty;  
listen to me, O God of Jacob.* Selah  
9 *Look upon our shield, O God;  
look with favor on your anointed one.*

[then the Psalmist makes an affirmation of trust]  
10 *Better is one day in your courts  
than a thousand elsewhere;  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God*

- than dwell in the tents of the wicked.*
- 11     *For the LORD God is a sun and shield;  
          the LORD bestows favor and honor;  
          no good thing does he withhold  
          from those whose walk is blameless.*
- 12     *O LORD Almighty,  
          blessed is the man who trusts in you.*

## **ON PILGRIMAGE**

The other component of those who live lives that know God’s refreshment and are thus able to refresh others is the perspective and purpose with which they live. The Psalmist refers to this as those “who have set their hearts on pilgrimage (5b).” Pilgrims are people who are going somewhere. They realize, in the words of the old Gospel song, “This world is not my home, I’m just a pass’n through...” Where are we headed? Well, ultimately we are bound for heaven, and the way there is through Jesus Christ who declared Himself to “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (Jn. 14:6). But before heaven, there is a lot of work and service to do in the cause of Christ according His calling in our lives and the gifts He’s blessed us with.

The perspective of knowing who we serve, why we’re here, and where we’re going is essential for living well. This keeps us from getting preoccupied with the conditions on the trail– the conditions in this life. There are many seeming inequities in the here and now. Good people suffer and bad people often seem to get off scot-free. But, if this life is only a road we travel to the eternal (as Scripture affirms), then we must wait to do our evaluating until we reach the other side. There we will understand God’s plan and how the trials of this life served to develop us. That’s why James tells us, in James 1:2-4,

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

I was inspired this last week to come across a prayer written by Serbian bishop Nikoli Velimirovic. He spoke out against Nazism in the early 1940's and was therefore arrested and taken to the Dachau concentration camp. Here is part of his prayer:

“Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them. Enemies have driven me into your embrace more than friends have. Friends have bound me to earth; enemies have loosed me from earth and have demolished all my aspirations in the world.”

That’s true if we know we’re on pilgrimage. Things attaching us to this world are really a hindrance. Things that remind us we don’t really belong here help us on our way– and enemies have a way of doing that.

With the long-range view of things, we can rise above the disappointments and limitations of our lives. Self-pity over our troubles seems beneath our calling. We live instead with eager anticipation for what God has prepared for us at the end of this earthly trail. Without complaining, we do our best in our circumstances to serve the God with

whom we will reign throughout eternity. Hebrews 11 chronicles all those greats of the faith like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Samson, David, and the prophets. A recurring theme in the chapter is captured in vs. 13-16:

*All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.... they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

In other words, we don't get it all now. Quit expecting heaven on earth. And if we evaluate the present without a view of where we're heading, we make a critical mistake. But, if we have that forward look of the pilgrim, we can accept the "givens" of our lives no matter how limiting. We serve the present age with vigor and without railing at the injustices of our lives. That's how our lives "*become roads [God] travels,*" to use The Message's phrasing.

Finally, let's consider the refreshing springs our lives become to others.

### **A PLACE OF SPRINGS**

The blessing is not just ours. The springs refresh others around us as well. There is a fruitfulness and an outflow that greatly enriches all who come in contact with us. There is that phrase in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.* Before reading Philip Keller's insightful book on this Psalm, I'd always thought of that as God's goodness and mercy behind me, supporting me. But Keller pointed out another way to look at this. He sees it as the blessing we can leave in our wake as we go through life. Wouldn't you like to leave goodness and mercy behind you wherever you go? What a blessing that is to people who are struggling or need encouragement.

And, some of the greatest blessings of history have arisen out of those who had this attitude.

- John Bunyan wrote his classic, Pilgrim's Progress, from a stinking dungeon. That book has guided millions upon millions of believers on their pilgrimage over four centuries.
- Louis Braille, blinded by an injury in his father's harness shop at the age of three, ended up inventing the Braille system, enabling millions of blind people to read.
- Florence Nightingale, too ill to move from her bed, reorganized the hospitals of England.
- Semi-paralyzed and under constant threat of more strokes, Louis Pasteur did his greatest work in understanding bacteria and in attacking disease.
- And Helen Keller, born blind and deaf, wrote, "I thank God for my handicaps. For through them I found myself, my work, and my God!"

Let's live in a way that blesses others with the springs we've been able to create in our valleys of difficulty through drawing upon God's strength. If we do that, having our hearts set on pilgrimage, we will know the truth of vs. 11:

*For the LORD God is a sun and shield;  
the LORD bestows favor and honor;  
no good thing does he withhold*

*from those whose walk is blameless.*