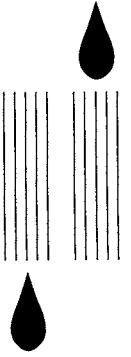


SESSION FOUR

A Glimpse of Glory



NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

Let's be clear about this. Psalm 84 is not about a building. It is about a Presence—a living, electrifying Presence that draws us inexorably into its light and its love.

There is something about Brahms's interpretation of this psalm that enables us to feel the force of this love. I first felt it in high school when our school choir began rehearsing "How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place." My personal situation almost certainly had something to do with it. My grandmother was dying. The choir's rehearsals coincided with the period of her hospitalization and death. The soaring strains of "Blessed are those who dwell within Thy house" were a powerful antidote to the mental image I could not shake: her casket being lowered into the cold November ground.

Looking back, though, I think the comfort I felt from this piece came from more than just the picture it painted of my grandmother, singing hymns in God's house. There was something about its warmth and richness that radiated this message: you are not alone. Finally, "How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place" celebrates more than just our presence with God; it celebrates *God's presence with us*. And that is the most comforting thing of all.

Perhaps this double comfort is the reason this piece has ministered to so many people for so many years. Brahms sensed that Psalm 84 is not about a faraway place in the far distant future. No, it is about a Presence who abides with us even now and is busy changing us "from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place."

As you lead this session, try to enable participants to feel this double dynamic. We may be on a pilgrimage to God's house, but God, like the prodigal Father, is running out to welcome us home.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Describe the biblical practice of "pilgrimage," and connect that concept with their own lives in relationship to God.
2. Summarize in two or three sentences the significance of God's house in the Old Testament.
3. Compare and contrast the Bible's descriptions of God's heavenly house with their notions of heaven.

Resources You May Need

A compact disc player and a compact disc of Brahms's *Requiem*

Listening Alerts for this session

A chalkboard or newsprint and markers

A collection of angel pictures or a slide presentation

Copies of Participants' Resources 4A and 4B

Access to your church sanctuary

An accompanist and copies of selected hymns

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Begin by playing the fourth movement of Brahms's *Requiem*. Remind participants of the comments in the Listening Alerts, but invite them to simply listen prayerfully if they prefer.

or

Play the fourth movement of the *Requiem* and ask members of the group to complete the following sentences while they listen. Then discuss their responses.

- When I listen to this piece, it makes me think of _____.
- When I listen to this piece, it makes me feel _____.

My suspicion is that this will elicit a wide variety of responses—some memories of when people heard or performed the piece, some images of heaven, some feelings of love and longing for those who have died. Let the discussion continue for as long as you feel it is productive.

2. Introduce the person selected at the last session to read the “Notes from the Author” section from the *Leader's Guide*. This will set the tone for what follows and introduce this session's themes.

or

Use the “Notes from the Author” section as a resource for your own summary of this session's themes.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Start this section by taking an “angel” inventory. Display the angel pictures brought by participants and give everyone time to examine them and comment on them.

or

Introduce the person who agreed at the last session to prepare a slide presentation on angels in art.

or

Invite participants to work together on their own artistic representation of heaven using newsprint and markers. This is probably best done in small groups, with each group having a designated artist. After an appropriate time, display the results and invite a spokesperson from each group to say a few words about their work.

2. Compare and contrast the images of angels and heaven from the above activity with those in the following passages: Exodus 25:10-22; Ezekiel 1:4-14; Revelation 4. I suggest you go about this in one of two ways. First, if you have

not worked in small groups yet, assign one passage to each of three groups, using Participants' Resource 4A as a handout to guide the groups' discussions. Or, introduce the three participants selected at the last session to make two- or three-minute presentations on the passages, using Participants' Resource 4A as a guide.

and

Afterward, invite participants to discuss whether and how these passages have changed their views of what "God's house" is like. Are their views more appealing or less appealing now? Conclude this discussion by commenting on the obvious longing of the psalmists for God. Though none of them could be accused of a romanticized view of God's house, they still obviously wanted to dwell there.

3. Present a mini-lecture on pilgrimages. The entry on that subject in *Harper's Bible Dictionary* will give you background information. Some basic points include:

- A pilgrimage is a journey made to a holy place or sanctuary in order to worship there.
- After David brought the ark to Jerusalem and Solomon built the Temple there, Jerusalem increasingly became the goal of religious pilgrimages.
- Worshipers would often come to celebrate specific festivals. These celebrations had both a corporate and an individual dimension, as is illustrated by Hannah's very specific prayer request (see 1 Samuel 1:3-20).
- The journey itself was part of the religious experience. Pilgrim psalms such as Psalms 24, 84, and 131 are probably examples of the songs and prayers shared on the way.

and/or

Make an actual pilgrimage to your own church's sanctuary. Begin by observing that "every visit to a temple or church or meeting of believers is in a profound sense a pilgrimage."¹ Then announce that the rest of the group session will be devoted to just such a pilgrimage. Describe it as an opportunity to:

¹ James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), p. 275.

- Reflect on our own lives as a pilgrimage toward God
- Remember those who have died
- Bring praise for God's presence with us in life and in death

A suggested order for the service is found in Participants' Resource 4B. You may want to invite your pastor to join in the leadership of this service, or assign parts of it to various participants. Also, if you have a battery-operated compact disc player, lead the procession while playing the fourth movement of the *Requiem* again. You will want to give some thought to where you want the group to gather when they actually reach the sanctuary. I would suggest making a circle around the communion table.

CLOSING

If you have not already done so as a part of the pilgrimage service, close with a hymn and/or one of the printed prayers in Participants' Resource 4B.

Looking Ahead

1. If you would like a soloist for the opening of Session Five, select that person now. The piece is, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child."
2. If you are going to ask a participant to give the mini-lecture on Brahms's relationship with his mother as suggested in activity #2 under Exploring the Scripture, do so now with clear indications of time limits and sources.
3. Distribute copies of the Listening Alerts for the fifth movement of the *Requiem*.

Listening Alerts for Session Four

General Comments: There is a gentleness to this movement that communicates the comfort of God's presence in a way that words alone could not. As the instruments and voices intertwine, they give us a sense of what it is like to stand in the courts of the Lord, ever singing God's praise.

A. Psalm 84:1 (mm. 1-45)

<i>Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen, Herr Zebaoth!</i>	<i>How lovely are your dwellings, Lord of Sabaoth!</i>
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Brahms uses this verse almost like a refrain in this movement. Here it is sung twice, firmly establishing our focus on God.

B. Psalm 84:2 (mm. 46-84)

<i>Meine Seele verlangt und sehnet sich nach den Vorhöfen des Herrn. Mein Leib und Seele freuen sich in dem lebendigen Gott.</i>	<i>My soul desires and longs after the courts of the Lord. My body and soul rejoice in the living God.</i>
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Each voice in turn *verlangt und sehnet* (longs and faints) for the courts of the Lord. Then, in the last part of the verse, all four parts join to rejoice in/cry out for God's presence.

C. Psalm 84:1 (mm. 85-108)

Verse one's refrain is repeated here at the movement's heart.

D. Psalm 84:4 (mm. 109-153)

<i>Wohl denen, die in deinem Hause wohnen; die loben dich immerdar!</i>	<i>Well-being to those who in your house dwell; they praise you evermore!</i>
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The pace, energy, and volume pick up with the last phrase of this verse. Listen for the way the line goes up on the word *loben* (praise), almost like the songs of the blessed before the throne.

Listen, too, for the way the word *immerdar* (evermore) is repeated over and over again.

E. Psalm 84:1 (mm. 154-179)

Up until this point, the refrain has always been sung softly. Here, the dynamics build so that there is strength as well as sweetness in the movement's benediction.

I. Read Exodus 25:10-22

Information: This passage describes the design of the ark, which was seen as God's throne. It would have been placed inside the "Holy of Holies," the innermost part of the Tent of Meeting, and later, the Temple.

Reflection: How do these cherubim compare to your previous ideas about cherubs?

II. Read Ezekiel 1:4-14

Information: Ezekiel's vision of God's presence was thought to be so risky that the rabbis forbade anyone under thirty to read it! This was because no one was supposed to be able to actually see God, let alone describe what they had seen. According to the notes in the *Oxford Annotated NRSV*, "the *living creatures* are cherubim, guardians of God's throne . . . symbolizing mobility, intelligence, and strength" (p. 1058, no. 4).

Reflection: Would you want to meet one of these creatures in a dark alley? What would you think if one showed up on a Christmas card?

III. Read Revelation 4

Information: This vision describes John's peek through the door of heaven (verse 1). The throne corresponds to other biblical descriptions of God's being enthroned above the ark of the covenant. Also similar is the description of the living creatures who keep constant watch and give unceasing praise.

Reflection: John Bunyan ended his famous work, *Pilgrim's Progress*, with the words: "There were also of them that had wings, and they answered one another without intermission, saying, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord.' And after that they shut up the gates; which, when I had seen, I wished myself among them . . ."

After your "glimpse through the door" in this passage, could you say the same?

A Pilgrimage Service

Call to Worship

Leader: How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!

People: My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

Leader: Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.

People: Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.

(Psalm 84:1-4)

Procession *(Worshippers make their way to the sanctuary)*

Hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy" *(Worshippers remove their shoes)*

Prayer

Leader: Eternal God, we thank you for
the great cloud of witnesses
who have run the race of life before us
and have kept the faith.
We are especially grateful for those loved ones,
whose names come rushing to our lips,
who now dwell in your gracious presence

(worshippers name those who have died)

Enable us to trust in you
to lead us all the days of our lives,
that we too may one day join
the company of saints gathered in your home,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (Charles Wesley)

Prayer

*All: O God, a day in your courts
 is better than a thousand elsewhere,
 and those who live in the shelter of the Most High
 will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress.”
 Help us to know this, that as we walk
 among the shadows of this life
 our eyes may be open to the beauty of the eternal.
 Renew our strength each day to seek your will
 and to lean upon your mercy,
 confident that we are joined
 in the communion of the saints
 and shall one day live
 in the light of your glorious presence,
 through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.*

Benediction

Leader: The Lord bless you and keep you.
 The Lord be kind and gracious to you.
 The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.